

# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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narcissistic Personality Disorder

narcissism in the Spiritual Life

mine to Fullness

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# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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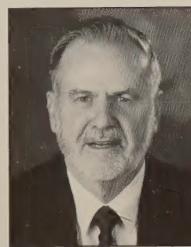


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# Editor's Page

## Stewards of the Mystery

In the second reading for the recently celebrated feast of the Epiphany, St. Paul describes his ministry as "the stewardship of God's grace." He is referring to the extraordinary call that he received and to "the mystery that was made known to [him] by revelation." He says to the church in Ephesus, it "was given to me for your benefit" (Ephesians 3:2-3). This reading is a most appropriate one for the celebration of the Epiphany, the revelation of Christ to all nations, and is worthy of further reflection as we move from the celebration of Christmas toward ordinary time when the workaday world resumes and the culture in which we live urges us to start anew with a firm purpose of self-improvement. What does it mean for us to share in Paul's "stewardship of God's grace," or, to say it as the great German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner might have, to be stewards of the mystery? What is this mystery that we bear?

It is, in the words of St. John, something that "we have heard, [that] we have seen with our eyes, {that} we looked upon and touched with our hands" (1 John 1:1). It is the mystery of the incarnation, of the "Word made flesh" in Christ. It is the presence of Christ as "the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). This is the mystery that we proclaim and care for as we go about our ordinary lives and ministries.

It is not simply a past event to which we bear witness, but a present and ever unfolding reality—a reality that we can never grasp fully but only know "through a glass darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). And our encounter with this mystery is not first as something to be known, but as someone who knows us. This experience of being known is at once overwhelming (as it was for Paul) and also intimate. We see ourselves as God sees us, with our sinfulness and brokenness but at the same time as known thoroughly and loved completely.

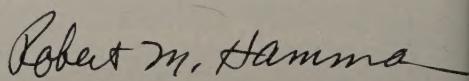
It is for all but the most extraordinary mystics a fleeting moment. As Rahner wrote in his *Foundations for Christian Faith*, this mystery "presents itself to us in the mode of withdrawal, of silence, of distance so that speaking about it, if that is to make sense, always requires listening to its silence." As Rahner often asserted, we come to know God only by experiencing ourselves in a constant process of self-transcendence. This mystery is an ever-receding and infinite horizon that opens us to unlimited possibilities of encounter.

How can we presume to speak of ourselves as stewards of such a mystery? How can we be so bold as to dare to think of ourselves as teachers, counselors, mediators, or even guides to such a mystery? We can do so only if we stand on and constantly return to the call of Christ, the experience of being known by the mystery. It is only when we listen with others to the mystery that we can dare to speak. It is only when

we recognize that we can never in any way control the mystery that we can begin to walk with others. It is only when we allow ourselves to be opened up and led by the mystery that we can begin to lead.

As the bright joy of the Christmas season fades and the cold reality of human weakness and selfishness—in short, of sin—comes back into focus, the need for stewardship of that mystery begins to emerge. Because the reality of the mystery requires a response of love and makes demands, it is in a way threatening and elicits resistance. Evil will seek to subvert the mystery. We have only to recall the gospel from the feast of the Epiphany in which the Magi, who followed the star to worship Christ, did so not only under the shadow of Herod's fear and jealousy, but ultimately in the specter of his murder of the innocents.

This issue of **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** explores how we encounter and resist the mystery God and the danger we face—even as we desire to steward the mystery—of making ourselves the focus of our spiritualities and our ministries. Allan Schnarr examines how we may participate in the mystery of the incarnation in his article, "Feeling with God," and John Navone, S.J., looks at rich biblical images of this mystery as metaphors for spiritual development in his article, "Famine to Fullness." We also take a close look at the issue of narcissism as a cultural reality today. Paul D. Marceau looks at "Narcissism in the Spiritual Life" while Len Sperry and Jonathan J. Sperry examine "Healthy Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder." We are especially pleased to be able to publish this collaboration of a father and son and wish to congratulate them on it. And we hope that all the articles in this issue will further your stewardship of the mystery.



Robert M. Hamma

**HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** no longer sends subscribers 3 renewal notices. As a way to save on postage and stationery, we send only 2 notices. The first will arrive 3 months before your subscription's expiration date. The second will arrive 1 month after the expiration date. We will also be sending all of our online subscribers a renewal notice by e-mail. This too will help us keep our costs down. Thanks for your cooperation!



# Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I take issue with the recent article in **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** by Michael Crosby entitled "Is Celibacy the Main Reason for the Lack of Vocations?"

On the biblical evidence, Crosby ignores the apostles' response to Christ in Matthew 19:10 "If that is the case with a man and his wife, it is better not to marry." To which Christ himself says, "Not all can accept this." Crosby also dismisses Paul's words that "it is better not to marry" by pointing out that Paul does say he does not give this as a command from the Lord. Paul's suggestion is just that, a suggestion, but it cannot be dismissed simply by pointing out that it is a suggestion, not a command. A suggestion of the Apostle Paul is worth a great deal.

Second, on the theological aspect of celibacy, Crosby misses the mark entirely. Without going into too much detail, it is enough to say that two thousand years of Western and Eastern theology cannot be shuffled off with a little talk about the social conditions of the sixteenth century.

Third, on the cultural aspects of his analysis, Crosby stumbles the most. His argument seems to be this: before Vatican II, people didn't think about sex, so it was easy to give up; but now everyone does think about sex, all the time, and so they should not have to give it up. Even a cursory reading of the Curé de Ars on the point would be enough to prove this wrong, since even he struggled. Crosby goes on, oddly, to point out that many young movements among religious orders are strong in vocations, but then says that this is because they are going back to older forms of apostolic work. Which is certainly true and to the point, but he moves on without further comment. What he has said actually gives the reader reason to doubt his underlying claim! And furthermore his remarks on pornography use leave me wondering whether he thinks it is even wrong, surely a point on which the tradition is clear.

I am in favor of married priests, at least the possibility of them. Some of the most important obstacles to this are administrative. Treatments like Crosby's leave the difficult questions out; they ride to the finish line on a wave of agreement and superficial sense. The church actually needs a new administrative structure to accommodate new directions in ecclesiology, for example married priests and the union of East and West: How can the church pay for a priest's family, for insurance, etc.? How can East and West establish workable hierarchies that alleviate the need for half a dozen bishops for the same geographical area? In a fluid society, where few people live long in the same place, how is the parish to be reconceived? These issues are bound up together, and instead of addressing such hard questions, which are admittedly far from his original topic, Crosby leaves us with the platitudes of 1970s attacks on celibacy.

The author also fails to note that in other Christian churches, the Orthodox particularly, but also among more traditional Protestants, the vocation crisis rages despite the possibility of marriage. From such a thoughtful and respected writer, I would have expected something more substantial.

What Crosby fails most to see is just this: Discipline is the norm of bliss. Discipline is the key to vocations, since nothing easy is worth the devotion of one's life. After Vatican II, people left the orders more because of a breakdown in discipline than anything else. It was a crazy time. Seminarians raised under "fortress Catholicism" were suddenly let free, with their mail uncensored, their weekends off, many of their bishops telling them it was fine to start dating since celibacy was soon to be relaxed; the Tridentine liturgy was suddenly discarded and banned by the Holy See in a move without precedent in the whole history of the People of God. Discipline broke down, and confusion reigned.

What bears out my observation about discipline is the current state of religious orders. Tell me whether the order mandates wearing the habit, and I will tell you whether they have many vocations. Or tell me how seriously they follow the rules of the founder, in general how strict they are, and I will tell you how many vocations they have. The Benedictines of Norcia fast on one meal a day from September 14th to Easter, and we should not be surprised to learn that they have vocations.

This is the truth that everyone knows and no one says: the easier you make the order, the fewer people will want to join it. Return, therefore, to the rule of the founder; sleep on wooden beds; rise early to pray, fast and abstain; live in real poverty; eat lentils instead of beef stroganoff and an apple instead of cheesecake, leave off television programming and minister to the poor. Return to the wilderness. Remember: All great works begin in the desert, even the salvation of the world. One can see the signs of a thaw first from the mountains, far off, but the labor of the climb makes the view hard to attain. When the effort is made, one will find monks already living on the mountainsides who have withdrawn to fast and pray. That image of the religious life as one of sacrifice, fasting and prayer will outlast Crosby's facile observations.

Sincerely,

Timothy Kearns

Center for Medieval and Byzantine Studies

Catholic University of America



# *Healthy Narcissism and* NARCISSISTIC PERSONALITY DISORDER

Sam Sperry, M.D., Ph.D. and Jonathan J. Sperry, Ph.D.

Not only is narcissism alive and well in America, but it became a major news event this past year. Since the "me-ism" of the 1970s was analyzed in the bestseller, *The Culture of Narcissism*, healing with narcissism has preoccupied psychiatrists and other clinicians. In that book, historian Christopher Lasch argued that Americans were becoming increasingly self-preoccupied and narcissistic to the extent that pathological narcissism was becoming normalized and socially acceptable in American culture.

Lasch's impressionistic appraisal has since been empirically supported by various research studies. For example, national survey data from the National Opinion Research Center indicates that a major shift in values took place in America in the late 1960s. Before that shift Americans valued duty, hard work, a high work ethic and delayed gratification. After the shift these values began to be replaced by pleasure, a reduced work ethic and immediate gratification. In a recent book, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, the psychologist-authors recount other research and chronicle social trends

that fuel what they call "the relentless rise of narcissism in our culture." Chief among these trends are the "self-esteem movement" and the movement away from "community-oriented thinking" and toward self-actualization and entitlement. Perhaps the most defining trend they note is the shift that occurred in parenting, from limit-setting toward letting kids do and get whatever they wanted. These authors conclude that this changed attitude toward parenting significantly "fueled the narcissism epidemic."

It may seem ironical that within this societal context, a major news event was that the DSM-V (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition*) Work Group on Personality Disorders was considering eliminating the narcissistic personality disorder (NPD) from its much-awaited fifth edition. This article discusses the background of this decision, the ensuing controversy, and its likely implications. Before this discussion there is an extended description of the dynamics of narcissism and the experience of narcissism, particularly in ministry. First, we begin with an illustration to contextualize the discussion.

## THREE SEMINARIANS

Following are profiles of three seminarians in the midst of their theology studies. Each represents a type of narcissism. A commentary on each follows the section on types of narcissism.

### *Sam*

Sam is a second year seminarian at a diocesan seminary. He is a top student and athlete with many friends and commands the respect of his peers, seminary faculty and administration. He impresses others with his charm, self-confidence, leadership ability, communication skills, interpersonal skills and sense of humor. He has been heard joking with his friends that he has not met a mirror that he doesn't like. He knows he is quite gifted and admired by many. Yet, despite his occasional braggadocio, he is a sincere individual whose priority is personal and spiritual development. He is realistic about his potential and believes he can and will become an effective preacher and pastor. Nevertheless, at the present time his primary concern is "learning as much and growing as much as I can before ordination."

### *Jerry*

Jerry is a second year seminarian who is an energetic, confident, and engaging individual who enjoys the limelight. Because of his ability and good looks he has become a student leader in the seminary and was selected as a regular cantor and an occasional homilist at seminary liturgies, both remarkable distinctions since fourth year students are usually assigned these roles. He greatly enjoys his reputation as the "alpha" male among his seminary peers and envisions his priestly career as a "rising star in the Church." He is highly organized, detail-oriented and highly effective. He insists he will be a compelling presider and a beloved diocesan official or pastor. On occasion, particularly when he is "on a roll" he boasts of "being appointed a bishop in the not too distant future." When challenged about how this might come about, his disdainful response is: "How can they keep this from me. Look around guys. I've got everything it takes and more!"

### *Jeff*

Jeff is in the same year of studies as Sam and Jerry. He admires and is quite solicitous toward Jerry, but is secretly angry at and envious of him. He sees his future in the priesthood as a career trajectory aimed at a top leadership position at the chancery or even in the diplomatic corps for the Vatican Department of State. Yet, he keeps these career aspirations to himself. Those around him would hardly suspect these strivings since Jeff has done little to cultivate relationships with key diocesan officials or to establish a reputation as a "company man" like Jerry and other seminarians who are hierarchy-bound. Instead, he comes across to others as a congenial, likeable, and unassuming seminarian who is loyal and can be counted upon to extend a helping hand. While he receives average grades his instructors suspect that he is underachieving. He has been known to berate himself and become self-reproachful when criticized—even mildly—by his peers or faculty. Lately, his spiritual director has become increasingly concerned at Jeff's worried, guilt-ridden and

depressed manner, and puzzled because there is no obvious cause, such as a loss or failure.

## TYPES OF NARCISSISM

In everyday usage, the terms narcissism, narcissist, and narcissistic refer to individuals whose ambitions, aspirations, or entitlement tend to be out of proportion to their demonstrated talents. Some narcissists are boastful and self-aggrandizing in public, while others only reveal their ambitions and entitlement to those closest to them. It is important to distinguish between individuals who hold realistic self-assessments of their achievements and those with grandiose self-assessments. Healthy narcissists are more likely to make realistic self-assessments in contrast to pathological narcissists whose assessments are much more grandiose. This section describes four types of narcissism including healthy, covert, overt and malignant narcissism.

### *Healthy Narcissism*

Healthy narcissism can be described as the capacity to love oneself and to maturely love others. It requires the ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, and the capacity to demonstrate empathy and genuineness to others. Healthy narcissists possess an adequate sense of self-esteem which enables them to function effectively in the world as well to share in the emotional life of others. For Freud, good mental health reflects the capacities to both work well and to love well.

Freud contended that healthy narcissism is an essential part of normal development. He argued that adequate parental love and caring results in meeting the self-needs of that child. Just as important, the parent's attitude toward the child is understood as a revival and reproduction of their own narcissism. He believed that children experience omnipotence of thought and that parents stimulate and reinforce that feeling because in their child they see the things that they have never fully achieved themselves. Accordingly, parents tend to overvalue the qualities of their child. However, when parents

act in an extreme opposite manner and the child is rejected or inconsistently reinforced, the self-needs of the child are not met and pathological narcissism is likely to result.

### *Forms of Pathological Narcissism*

James F. Masterson, M.D., has described compelling portraits of two types of pathological narcissism, which he calls the exhibitionist narcissist and the closet narcissist. Unlike the healthy narcissist, he describes the developmental trajectory of both pathological types as the failure to adequately develop an age- and phase-appropriate sense of self. The primary reason for this failure is assumed to be a defect in the attachment style with the primary caregiver—usually the mother—and the inability of the caregiver to provide adequate and consistent psychological nurturance.

### *Overt Narcissism*

Overt narcissists, also called exhibitionistic or classic narcissists, believe they are better than others, continually seek attention, lack emotionally warm and caring relationships, seek status, power and possessions, and tend to be overly concerned with their physical appearance. Overt narcissism is the focus of the DSM-IV-TR (Text Revision) description and diagnostic criteria. It differs from other types of narcissism in several important ways. The overt narcissist is described as having an inflated, grandiose sense of self with little or no conscious awareness of the emptiness within, nor of the emotional needs of others. While they may boast and exaggerate their importance to others, inside they typically experience a sense of insecurity and worthlessness. This experience of inner emptiness requires the recurrent infusion of external confirmation of their importance and value. As a result, they constantly seek and demand confirmation of their worth and specialness. When they succeed in receiving such confirmation in the form of status, admiration, wealth and success, they feel an internal elation.

They also behave in an overtly grandiose manner and treat others—particularly those perceived as

power in status—with contempt. Not surprisingly, they typically lack empathy for others. They typically feel depressed, ashamed and envious of those who succeed in attaining what they lack. Their lack of pleasure in work or love is painful to witness. Furthermore, when they feel rejected, thwarted or frustrated, they are likely to act out their insecurities in outbursts of anger called narcissistic rage, verbal abuse, and obnoxious behaviors.

These individuals spend considerable energy evaluating themselves against others, and will defend their wounded self-esteem through a combination of idealizing and devaluing others. When they idealize another, they feel more special or important by virtue of their association with that person. When they devalue someone, they feel superior. Not surprisingly, their colleagues and significant others tend to feel unreasonably idealized, unreasonably devalued, or simply disregarded by them.

#### **Covert Narcissism**

By contrast, covert narcissists, also called shy or closet narcissists, are highly attentive to the needs of others. In fact, they come across as humble and unassuming individuals who avoid being the center of attention. Still, they are exquisitely sensitive to criticism and slights from others and are likely to respond with harsh self-criticism. Like overt narcissists, covert narcissists have grandiose fantasies, feel a sense of entitlement and are exploitive, but they are characterized by worry, ineffective functioning and unfulfilled expectations. When they are overly stressed they are likely to become defensive, hostile or self-reproachful. Because of intrapsychic dynamics their grandiose fantasies are seldom if ever expressed in overt behavior since these things are believed to be beyond their conscious attainment. Instead these individuals are conflicted and guilty over their exhibitionistic, competitive and aggressive desires, which lead them to suppress or repress any awareness of the existence of these qualities. Basically, their severe inner conscience finds these fantasies unacceptable and demands that they suppress them and experience guilt. As a result, they can attribute all goodness

and power to themselves but relegate all weakness and badness to others.

Like others who know them, covert narcissists tend to perceive themselves as shy, unassertive and incapable of achieving their dreams. The first hint of their underlying grandiosity appears when they realize that adolescent day-dreams of being heroic and acclaimed have persisted into adult life. Such fantasies and lack of achievement lead to increased guilt, continued attacks from their conscience for not meeting self-set standards and feelings of worthlessness. Their inability to sustain ambitions or to pursue even attainable goals with full dedication results in significant self-pity, feelings of hurt and depression. If they seek psychotherapy it is typically because of depression and a sense of inner deadness since nothing in life matches the thrill of triumphant achievement that they imagine is due them.

Despite believing that they deserve to be recognized for their specialness, they are plagued by self-doubts and so do not seek the affirmation of others for what they believe they are due. Moreover, they are unlikely to seek out appropriate friends or close intimate relationships because they fear exposure as frauds. As a result, they surround themselves with others whom they deem conspicuously inferior to themselves. When these individuals offer them praise, they discount this admiration as phony and insincere. Instead they ruminate about how little their true worth is appreciated and how others get the recognition for their achievements, and they procrastinate about accomplishing achievable tasks because they fear they will fail. As a consequence, their demeanor is decidedly retiring, modest and shy. Unlike overt narcissists who demand special attention from others in recognition of their superiority, covert narcissists are more likely to fawn over others whose accomplishments they envy while secretly harboring strong feelings of resentment and contempt.

Though they experience guilt and shame for their ambitions or accomplishments, they may still relentlessly pursue them without genuine regard for others, since the feelings of others are

*Like overt narcissists, covert narcissists have grandiose fantasies, feel a sense of entitlement, and are exploitive, but they are characterized by worry, ineffective functioning and unfulfilled expectations.*

viewed as less important than theirs. While they tend to hide their strivings and accomplishments for fear of engendering envy in others, they know envy well. They suffer intensely from it, even as they fiercely disavow it. Because they seldom show arrogance and aggression, they are seldom perceived by others as "narcissistic" even though they manifest less obvious traits and the underlying sense of vulnerability common to all narcissists. Vulnerability refers to their exaggerated reactivity. Commonly, narcissists react strongly to perceived threats to their self-esteem with intense feelings—overt or covert—of anger, envy, rage or harsh self-criticism, and mood variability such as irritability or depression, as well as avoidance and retaliatory or deceitful behavior. Their attentiveness should not be taken for empathy, for it is as difficult for them to connect emotionally to others as it is for the classic narcissist.

#### *Malignant Narcissism*

A more pathological version of the classic narcissist is the malignant narcissist. This type is only briefly noted here since it is presumed to be uncommon in ministry. Besides overt narcissistic features, malignant narcissists also exhibit sadistic, paranoid and antisocial or psychopathic features. Like the overt narcissist, they appear as self-sufficient and successful, yet their inner experience is that of being fragile, vulnerable to shame and hypersensitive to criticism. Failure to succeed in their grandiose endeavors is likely to result in prominent mood swings with feelings of emptiness, irritability, rage, suspiciousness and sadistic aggression. Suspiciousness and sadistic aggression tend to distinguish these individuals from overt narcissists. Furthermore, when these individuals are not involved in narcissistic pursuits, they tend to be cold, unempathic, exploitative and indifferent toward others.

#### NARCISSISM AND THE THREE SEMINARIANS

The reader may have already identified the type or pattern of narcissism for each of the three seminarians. Comparing their profiles

to the four types of narcissism, Sam matches the healthy narcissistic type. Jerry clearly matches the overt pattern, while Jeff matches the covert narcissistic pattern.

Clinical psychologists who evaluate candidates for admission to diocesan seminaries and religious orders find that a narcissistic pattern is relatively common among such applicants.

Generally, the healthy narcissistic pattern is a better fit with ministry than the pathological types or patterns of narcissism. Unfortunately, because clinical practice in America is significantly influenced by DSM diagnostic criteria, only the overt type of the narcissistic personality is likely to be identified and diagnosed. That means that the covert pattern of the narcissistic personality is unlikely to be identified and diagnosed. Among other things, it means that such individuals often do not receive the kind of psychotherapeutic help that could reduce their suffering and increase their ministerial effectiveness and well-being.

#### DSM vs. PDM

*The Psychodynamic Diagnostic Manual* (PDM) was recently developed as a complement to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). PDM describes both healthy and disordered personalities and symptom patterns. In addition, it provides profiles of mental functioning that include patterns of relating, comprehending and expressing feelings. Unlike the DSM which focuses exclusively on external behavior and seeks to answer the question: What is likely to be observed for a specific mental health disorder?" the PDM focuses primarily on internal experience, and seeks to answer the question: "What is it like to experience a specific mental health disorder?"

Diagnostically, DSM-IV-TR specifies nine behavioral criteria, (i.e., has a grandiose sense of self-importance; is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success; believes they are special and unique; requires excessive admiration; has a sense of entitlement; is interpersonally exploitative; lacks empathy; is

envious and shows arrogance) of which five are needed to make the diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. In contrast, the PDM indicates that the pathogenic belief about self for the narcissistic personality disorder is: "I need to be perfect to feel okay." The characteristic pathogenic belief about others is: "Others enjoy riches, beauty, power and fame; the more I have of those, the better I will feel."

Unlike the DSM, the PDM can be of considerable clinical value and utility to clinical psychologists and others evaluating candidates for the priesthood, religious life and other ministries. In addition to clearly and succinctly describing the intrapsychic dynamics of the narcissistic personality disorder and providing treatment considerations, it recognizes both the overt and the covert types of narcissistic personality disorders.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF NARCISSISM IN MINISTRY

Ministry provides a ready-made forum to reinforce and reconfirm the grandiose self. For the overt and covert narcissist, the theological formulation of vocation as a "call" from God, a sign of "being set apart," confirms their belief in their inherent specialness and superiority over others. For those with public ministries such as presiders and homilists, liturgies and other religious services are viewed as a forum to exhibit that special call. Even though they would publicly deny it, they may secretly harbor the belief that the real purpose of a religious service is "worship" of themselves. Accordingly, liturgies are primarily a performance where the worshiping congregation "mirrors", i.e., admires and praises the minister.

Because of their self-absorption and self-deceiving tendencies, pathologically narcissistic ministers must creatively distort the precept to love God and neighbor to fit their pathological perspective. For them, God, and everyone else exists for one purpose: to love and take care of them. Their basic spiritual deficit is a lack of awareness of grace and an incapacity for



gratitude. Not surprisingly, they imagine God as an all-giving father, and they perceive faith as magical entitlement. Consequently, they believe God will do exactly as they ask in their prayers, with no regard to the kind of claim God has on them. For them, there is only one kind of prayer: the prayer of petition or demand. Prayer as praise, self-examination, forgiveness or thanksgiving has little meaning for them. Some narcissistic ministers may have intense mystical leanings that pull them in the direction of mystical experience, including the occult. This is understandable in light of their sense of specialness and grandiosity. However, they are more likely to experience an exaggerated state of self-exaltation than a true mystical state. When prayers are not answered as they expect, they become narcissistically wounded and feel deeply rejected. As a result, they may reject God, becoming an atheist for an instant or forever, because God has let them down.

The overt narcissistic minister is typically insensitive to the suffering and needs of others. While they may offer to help others in need and engage in acts of charity, they will do these only if their charitable deeds are noticed by others. If their efforts do not bring attention to them they are unlikely to make a donation, extend a helping hand, lend a listening ear or continue these actions when the attention and praise of others stops. These ministers have learned the art of manipulation and will, on occasion, act opportunistically. While they may come across as lacking in warmth and consideration, their sense of inner direction allows them to inspire others and create a common cause, transcending petty self-interests. Nevertheless exploitation and coercion are features of overt and malignant narcissism. These features are not uncommon in sexual misconduct involving ministers with narcissistic personality disorders, particularly with the malignant pattern.

It should also be noted that while healthy narcissistic ministers can be ambitious, manipulative and sensitive to criticism, they typically possess sufficient self-confidence, adaptability and humor to be effective in ministerial settings and interpersonal challenges. Since they are not pathological or personality-disordered, it is much less unlikely that healthy narcissists will create the havoc in their ministries that is the hallmark of the overt, the covert and the malignant narcissists.

#### *Narcissism and Clericalism*

It would be remiss not to mention clerical culture and clericalism when discussing narcissism in ministry. The reason is that a priest's identity, attitudes and behaviors are influenced by culture, including the clerical culture in which they function. Clerical culture reflects values associated with privilege, entitlement, separateness and status, values consistent with narcissism. Clericalism is the extreme, and some would say pathological,



version of clerical culture, and is inconsistent with healthy priestly ministry (Conference of Major Superiors of Men, 1983). A priest's individual dynamics continually interact with the organizational dynamics of a diocese or religious community. That interaction—called "fit"—can either foster growth or regression and psychopathology in the priest. In other words, priests with a "good fit" between their healthy core values and a diocese's healthy core values are more likely to experience psychological and spiritual health and well-being than if there is a "poor fit." Thus, a diocese with healthy core values is likely to foster neutral or positive growth in priests with healthy narcissism, while a diocese that reflects the values of clericalism is more likely to limit positive growth and even reinforce existing pathological narcissism. For this reason, some would argue, individual dynamics of pathological narcissism is a relative contraindication for ordination to priestly ministry.

#### *Narcissistic Personality Disorder and DSM-V*

A November 29, 2010 *New York Times* article reported that the DSM Personality Disorders Work Group was considering dropping the narcissistic personality disorder from DSM-V. This disclosure has since engendered considerable and widespread discussion about narcissism. While many agree that it should be dropped because of significant problems with research findings, others have offered compelling evidence in favor of keeping NPD as a personality disorder. Several suggestions have been made to retain the disorder in DSM-V. Clinicians, patients and researchers have expressed strong, albeit different, reactions to the DSM Personality Disorders Work Group's decision.

Overall, clinicians and patients favoring elimination of the disorder have identified serious problems with the current conceptualization of NPD. In particular, they fault DSM-IV's emphasis on the covert type of pathological narcissism with its focus

on grandiosity and external, socially and interpersonally conspicuous behavior. This has resulted in considerable discrepancy between the clinicians' view and usage of the NPD diagnosis compared to its official diagnostic criteria. Not surprisingly, these clinicians are reluctant to use the diagnosis and some patients strongly oppose being "labeled" NPD, viewing it as prejudicial.

The concerns of researchers differ from clinicians and patients. Chief among these concerns are issues of validity and limitations in the description and criteria for the disorder. Criteria for any disorder must have a high degree of discriminant validity, which is the extent to which the criteria can identify one construct without displaying a high correlation with a less similar construct. Findings on the DSM-IV criteria for NPD displayed inconsistent results. In addition, a survey study of nearly 35,000 adults found that NPD was inversely related to age, with the largest decline occurring after age 29. The implication is that

NPD is a disorder of adolescence and young adulthood that seems to "disappear" before midlife. This is problematic because by definition a personality disorder is a life-long pattern of maladaptive behavior.

Two key concerns with the current description and criteria of the DSM-IV are: 1) its view of NPD has an overemphasis or one-sided emphasis on the dimension of grandiosity and 2) it underemphasizes the dimension of vulnerability. While all pathological narcissists present with grandiosity, DSM-IV emphasizes the externally focused grandiose self-view, exceptionally high aspirations and self-centeredness of the overt narcissist. However, it does not include the internal experience of having fantasies and ambitions that are unfulfilled which are more characteristic of the covert narcissist. As a result, those presenting with covert narcissistic features are unlikely to be diagnosed as NPD.

The current under-emphasis and under-recognition of vulnerability is also problematic. Experienced clinicians have long recognized that all three types of pathological narcissists experience variable and vulnerable self-esteem which alternates between overconfidence and inferiority. They tend to be hypersensitive to relatively minor criticism or questioning of their words or actions, and will react quickly with angry outbursts, hurt feelings or even physical symptoms. Often, pathological narcissists project their suffering and insecurities onto others through various kinds of acting out. Yet, DSM-IV has no criteria for vulnerability.

One researcher, Elsa Ronningstam, Ph.D., of Harvard Medical School has proposed a revised set of diagnostic criteria for DSM-V, that addresses many of the limitations of the description and criteria of NPD in DSM-IV. She broadened the definition of grandiosity and reformulated the characteristics and criteria of grandiosity as it differs among the overt, covert, and malignant types. She also adds the criteria of vulnerability as central to understanding this disorder. Presumably, such reformulated criteria will increase the validity of the

disorder and reflect the life-long pattern of dysfunctionality that defines a personality disorder. Interestingly, these suggested criteria seem to not only better reflect clinical practice but also are consistent with the PDM description of NPD.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

There is no doubt that narcissism influences American culture. For the most part this influence has been negative. The diagnosis of narcissistic personality disorder came into being just as narcissism and immediate gratification overtook duty and delayed gratification as cultural values in America. Unfortunately, there are significant problems with current DSM diagnostic criteria for the narcissistic personality disorder. Among them is the narrow focus on grandiosity and under-emphasis of the more general criterion of vulnerability. While the fate of NPD in DSM-V remains uncertain as of the summer of 2011, the preferred course of action may be a refinement of the narcissistic personality disorder criteria rather than the wholesale elimination of the disorder itself. Even if it is formally eliminated, clinicians could still assess narcissistic traits, and could offer psychotherapy focused on facilitating healthier narcissism. When it comes to the church, there is no question that pathological narcissism is incompatible with effective Christian ministry. Accordingly, those charged with screening candidates for the priesthood, religious life and other Church ministries would do well to assess candidates for pathological narcissism in all its guises, including overt, covert and malignant narcissism.

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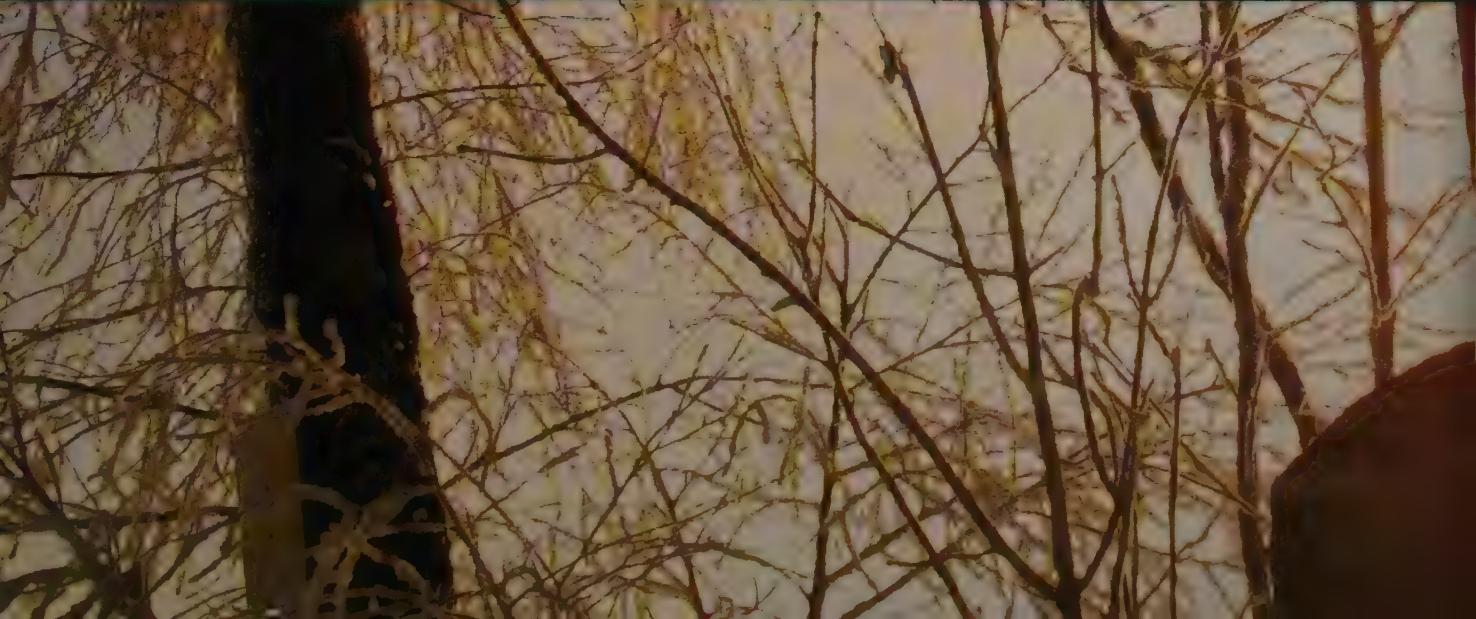
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# Narcissism in the Spiritual Life





Paul D. Marceau



**I**t is relatively easy to recognize that we are living in a culture of narcissism. Our contemporary consumer culture feeds a sense of “not-good-enough” and provides the fuel for self-help and self-improvement programs that promise to make one good enough. The political culture of rugged individualism and lack of a sense of the common good provides unrealistic expectations that an individual can do it all by oneself and needs only a lot of self-will and self-determination to overcome the odds (environmental and social forces notwithstanding.)

It may, however, be more difficult to recognize narcissism’s often insidious influence in the spiritual life. After all, isn’t the aim of the spiritual life to move beyond narcissism, selfishness and sinfulness? It would be short-sighted, however, to see narcissism’s influence on the spiritual life as simply some kind of drift or seepage from its pervasive hold on modern Western culture into the life of the spirit. In fact, narcissism’s roots in the spiritual life are entwined in the very processes of the spiritual life itself and have a history that goes back beyond Christianity.

This article will reflect on 1) the culture of narcissism; 2) manifestations of narcissism in the processes of the spiritual life and 3) the surrender of self as the way out of narcissism. Throughout this reflection the primary

*It is the covert narcissism that is most insidious in the spiritual life because it masks itself as its opposite, i.e., lack of self-worth.*

reference for narcissism will be based on the distinctions provided by Len Sperry and Jonathan J. Sperry in a companion article in this issue which describes three types of narcissism: overt, covert and malignant. It is the covert narcissism that is most insidious in the spiritual life because it masks itself as its opposite, i.e., lack of self-worth.

## A CULTURE OF NARCISSISM

### *Consumer Culture*

"I want it all and I want it NOW." So much for delayed gratification. The whole consumer culture in which we are immersed plays upon people's lack of a sense of self-worth—which in turn makes them vulnerable to advertising's shrill messages. People are told they really need something else (usually some material product) to make up what is lacking in themselves: a facelift, a diet, an exercise machine, a BMW, Botox, a match-making service. The list is endless and, of course, always means buying a product to compensate for one's miserable inadequacy. The reinforcement lines of "I'm worth it," and "I earned it; I deserve it," reveal a sense that one has to "do" something to receive the reward, as if the product were somehow a measure of a person's worth.

All of this is compounded by accompanying messages which claim that only the best, top of the line product is "good enough" for the consumer. Anything less reflects badly on a person's choices. So people are always being invited to upgrade or trade-up as soon as they can. Bigger and more expensive are, by definition, better. One's current state is unacceptable; upward mobility is the clarion call of consumer culture.

### *Political Culture*

Rugged individualism and self-determination are the American way. This is a land where anyone can make it if they work hard enough and long enough. In the past, immigrant stories were popular, stories of how people who came here with nothing pulled themselves up by their bootstraps and became successful citizens. Such immigrant stories seem less popular today when the message instead is: "they" are draining "our"

resources and not contributing to our society.

The implied corollary of this rugged self-determination is, of course, that anyone who is poor or hungry or homeless is to blame for not getting themselves out of that situation. We may all be born equal but it is a myth to think that we all have equal opportunity, as if there were no societal or personal restraints that make the uphill climb more difficult or impossible for some. So the final righteous judgment against the poor is: it's their own fault they are not rich, well fed, well-clothed. Self-will and gutsy determination are all that are needed to make something of oneself.

## NARCISSISM IN THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

### *The Beginnings*

As people begin to mature into adulthood (whenever that may happen in an individual's life) they begin to look to their future from the standpoint of their present. Where am I going with my life? What is my purpose, mission, destiny, call, vocation? What can I do with my life?

From the standpoint of the present these questions imply a movement toward a future goal, from what I am not yet to what I can become. There is much of the self-development or self-improvement dynamics inherent in the process. For the spiritual person this can take the form of a spiritual self-improvement project. How do I grow in holiness, become better, less sinful, closer to God? While these are all legitimate questions at the beginning of the journey, the quest for holiness can, nevertheless, become, subtly, an "ego strategy."

### *Self-knowledge*

The roots of this worthy life project are found in the most ancient principle of the spiritual life: *Know Thyself*. Self-reflection is the starting point for all spiritual growth. How can I know what my call, my purpose in life, is if I don't know myself? For they are one and the same thing. I am not called to be other than the person that God created me to be.

It is here, however, at the very beginning, that things can quickly go astray. There is a temptation present at

this point to become *other* than who I am, i.e., to create a false self, an idealized self. This is a form of self-denial. To become the wonderful, holy, idealized person that I want to be I have to engage in a process of transformation or conversion. I cannot remain who I am.

This starting point reinforces strong messages: "I am not good enough;" "I need to get better." To monitor one's growth and progress in the spiritual life we have developed various tools, primarily the examination of conscience, often focused on a particular virtue or vice. Daily or several times a day we can monitor our progress (or our lapses). The value of this method is its intentionality; I move purposefully through the day. It has the same pitfalls as the dieter who gets on the scale several times a day. The focus of the intention, however, remains self-improvement. I must get better. If I do all the correct spiritual practices, I will make myself better, holier.

As my spiritual director once gently commented after I described my morning prayer routine: *Sounds kind of busy! How about going out on your front porch with a cup of coffee and just sitting with God now and then?*

The permission to accept myself as one of God's beloved and trust in God who is always present and who will reveal what and how I am called to be [human] has brought me a great deal of peace and opened my eyes more fully to Life.

(From an anonymous spiritual friend who later noted: "The 'spiritual development' quest can be a slippery slope for many of us over-achievers, so maybe my example will resonate with others who may also find themselves trying too hard to find God.")

Conversion and transformation are important in the spiritual life. It is, however, essential to clarify the intention. If it is to run away from one's true self toward some idealized, false self it is not "true" or authentic. In times of adolescence in particular we all try on "alternate selves" to see how they fit. Usually this is based on some trait of a

hero or role model that we wish to adopt, e.g., a sense of humor, a charming personality. We soon learn whether this really fits or not, if not by feelings of awkwardness or discomfort then by the comments of others.

To attempt to be something we are not is a form of self-denial, pride and narcissism. To pursue the identity of a false, idealized self is a form of *self-rejection*. In turn, as Sperry and Sperry note:

...fantasies and lack of achievement lead to increased guilt, continued attacks from their conscience for not meeting self-set standards and feelings of worthlessness. Their inability to sustain ambitions or to pursue even attainable goals with full dedication results in significant self-pity, feelings of hurt and depression. It is ultimately a program of self-denial and self-destruction.

#### *Self-acceptance*

Every human being is called to grow to become the person God created. So the initial challenge of self-knowledge is the move toward *self-acceptance*. This is not always an easy challenge since there is usually a sense of discomfort with self that we want to move beyond. This sense of dis-ease varies considerably with the individual but there are some common themes: family heritage, body types, disabilities (or perceived disabilities) and sexual identity.

- I am too short (tall, fat, thin).
- I'm not cute enough/handsome enough to attract anyone.
- I'm not smart enough to get into a good school.
- I have no idea about my sexual identity; it seems to be all over the place.
- I hate my family of origin or I don't even know my family of origin.
- I was born into the wrong kind of body.

All of these are issues of self-acceptance. As long as one tries to run away from one's self toward some other identity, the true or authentic self is being denied—but it cannot be denied forever without some terrible conse-

quences. The effort it takes to repress one's true self saps life's energies as one tries desperately to put on a new identity. The true self will demand to be heard but emerges often in negative and destructive manifestations. This unhealthy form of self-denial emerges as harsh and judgmental condemnations of others or of society, damning the self that one does not want to be.

Consider, for example, the vitriol and hate speech that surrounds the issue of gay unions/marriage. While there are moral and political disagreements on the subject, it is rare to see these disagreements expressed in civil discourse. One wonders whence the anger, hatred, rejection and condemnation originate. Is it a form of self-denial that must keep the enemy within at bay?

In the effort toward human and spiritual growth one needs to move comfortably with oneself, and not seek to move *beyond* oneself in an attempt to put on a chosen but false identity. Self-acceptance is the key. The self is to be acknowledged and celebrated as one of God's gifts to the world. This, in the words of Sperry and Sperry, is the healthy form of narcissism.

#### BEYOND NARCISSISM

#### *Self-surrender*

While the initiating impetus for deepening a person's spiritual life may have been to engage in a kind of spiritual self-help or self-improvement program (or, negatively, the pursuit of a false identity as a means of self-denial), neither process will ultimately result in a healthy true self.

A person who engages in serious self-reflection reaches a tipping point with the realization that this thing called life is not all about me and how I get better, holier, or just less sinful. Consciousness expands to a reflection that is as large as life itself. It is not about how the world or others in my world fit into my life but about how I fit into the life of the world. In the vast sweep of time and place of this universe, the question becomes not just what is the meaning of my life but what is the meaning of any of this? We see the self



not as a monad, a self-contained individual life force, but in relation to the Other, others, creation, all of life.

A friend recently introduced a useful distinction into the discussion between *introspection* and *reflection*. She explained that introspection entails a turning inward; an examination of my “inner self.” Reflection, on the other hand, entails an examination of who I am and how I present myself in the world, who I am in relationship to God, creation, friends and strangers. Reflection is a far cry from navel-gazing.

Specifically in relation to the Divine, I may hunger and thirst for God, to be close to God, to feel the presence of God in an experience of the divine-human relationship. Ultimately I will realize that I cannot have God, possess God, manipulate God by prayer and fasting, or make God act in a certain way. God will be God. I can only be possessed by God, even if that means I am possessed by a hunger and thirst for God that cannot be quenched by any human act.

In the end, the individual realizes that he/she is powerless to make anything happen. It means that one has

to give up on all human efforts (i.e., acts of the self, of the will) and surrender oneself to God. “Take, Lord, Receive....” “Not my will but Thy will be done.” “Thy kingdom come.” But that is only the beginning of the movement from self-improvement to self-surrender.

Knowing what God is calling me to do, to be, is a maddening struggle that rarely ends in certainty. There may be a certain degree of confidence in one’s life choices, but never a righteous certainty that one can know exactly what God wants. There is, however, a solid foundation for knowing the will, the call, of God in one’s life: *self-knowledge*. As mentioned earlier, know who you are and you will know who you are called to be, for they are one and the same. The attempt to not be oneself, to flee from the self, can only result in self-destruction.

#### *Living with Integrity and Authenticity*

To know and live out of one’s true self demands rigorous and often painful honesty, best accomplished with the help of others. To think that I can accomplish the goal of living with integrity and authenticity by myself is to take the first step toward self-deception. And it is easy to veer onto that path, reassuring myself (for whatever reasons) that I am indeed on the right path. To be honest with another, to

receive the perceptions of others, their view of how I “show up” or present myself to the world can be a sobering experience, but also a wonderfully affirming experience. The spiritual traveler needs companions for the journey—a spiritual director, a spiritual support group to help keep oneself honest, and good friends who support and challenge by giving and receiving feedback with compassion and honesty.

The sole basis for a spiritual direction relationship is trust; spiritual direction is nothing other than a human relationship which involves a trust that the other cares only for the well-being and development of one of God’s sacred creations. True self-revelation comes only with time. In the years of prior development people have learned to build barriers or defenses to protect what is most precious to them. (I used to think that what people protected most was their sinfulness; I later learned that their deepest defenses are often around what they cherish the most, what is most sacred to them and what they do not want to put forth for public view and comment.)

Few people begin a human relationship with brutal self-revelation. We take our time entering the territory, letting the other inside to share what we hold there. As trust grows we not only make public our inner selves, we in turn

learn more about who we are and our dreams and hopes for our lives, knowing that they will be held gently. We also know that they can be gently challenged if there appears to be a disconnect between who we say we are and how we actually show up in the world.

To live in the world and act out of our true self, the self that God created, demands a continual creation of that self in the world. There are indeed many acts in a day that incarnate that self in the world. Conversion, development and improvement happen not because I am on a self-improvement program of some sort, but because I want to be the creation that God put into the world. That takes integrity, honesty, intentionality, many acts of self-surrender and lots of faith.

### LESSONS FROM THE EAST AND THE GOSPEL OF SAINT JOHN

Historically, much of the writing on the spiritual life in the Western Christian tradition focused on becoming—growing in the spiritual life and becoming better at it. We sought God as if God were not already present in our lives. (And missionaries brought God to countries God had not yet visited.) The effort was to move toward a sometimes elusive God.

We were less mindful of our own mystical tradition and wisdom from Eastern traditions: traditions which knew, in fact, that we cannot get any closer to God than God is to us right now; traditions which were more conscious of the “Eternal Now;” traditions which recognized that everything we seek is already here, if only we have eyes to see. Our consciousness was too bound by time and space to allow us to see the Eternal in the Now.

Taking one step North, South, East or West cannot bring a person one step closer to God. Fasting and doing the works of mercy do not bring God any closer. God will not love people more if they are successful in their spiritual self-improvement exercises. Humans live separated from God both by their sinfulness and their limited consciousness of the eternal in the now. The kingdom is *in* the here and the now, not somewhere on the other side of it. God dwells among us, not in the heavens. Here is where God is

tabernacled, where God has pitched a tent, in this creation.

We Western Christians continue, however, to engage in reflection by categorizing the world in terms of colors, quantities, qualities, shapes, sizes and units. We do not yet know the experience of a consciousness beyond categories, a consciousness only of the Eternal Now, of “*tota simul*”—all things all together all at once, without distinctions of categories. At least most of us don’t have this consciousness. Others, we know, have had a kind of breakthrough, an experience of a transcendent consciousness, in which they have traveled far without going anywhere, without taking a step. They experienced a consciousness that knew a different way of seeing, a seeing without limits or limitations, a consciousness that broke the bonds of time and space. The mystics of every tradition perhaps glimpse the world as it truly is—and hold out hope for the rest of us that we too might experience the world in its fullness. To get from here to there, or rather, from here to the fullness of the here and now demands both discipline and grace. Few have the discipline and none can manipulate the grace by acts of the will. In the meantime, we live by faith, not by sight.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The spiritual life, or conversely, the life of the human spirit, is above all else, a gift. We did not create ourselves and we do not hold ourselves in existence; someone, something else greater than the self does. The human spirit also experiences itself as incomplete and yearns for fulfillment and acts in ways both healthy and destructive to achieve that fulfillment. It is a fulfillment that no individual can make happen; I cannot possess, own or manipulate all or any of the parts of creation to achieve my fulfillment. The quest for the fullness of life is not achieved through some sort of spiritual self-improvement program. To grow in the spiritual life demands self-knowledge, self-revelation and, ultimately self-surrender. It requires being (and becoming) the creation that God has created. That is not narcissism; that is gift and grace.

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# Famine to Fu

## THE HUNGER AND THIRST OF HUMANKIND

Biblical references to famine, hunger and thirst are often associated with our spiritual condition or relationship with God. In this article the phrase "famine to fullness" contextualizes the paschal mystery—Jesus Christ's cross, resurrection and sending of his Spirit—in terms of the biblical symbolism for human existence as the pulls of God's grace and call, and counter-pulls to those things. There is within the structure of human interiority a pull or an attraction that, if followed, leads to human fulfillment and happiness. There is also a counter-pull or distraction that leads to self-destruction. Just as the biblical symbolism for famine, hunger and thirst connotes the emptiness of human life without God, the biblical symbolism for fullness and abundance connotes the fulfillment and happiness that God alone can give. The symbolic literary language of the Bible expresses the primordial religious knowledge that is the matrix for our conceptual theological knowledge. The tensive language of the Bible presents God's purpose for humankind in conflict with obstacles to God's purpose. Because God is Happiness Itself, the tensive language of the Bible appropriately symbolizes human existence as pulls toward and counter-pulls away from Happiness Itself.

Jesus Christ has shared the hunger and thirst of the human heart for God, and has compassionately satisfied that hunger and thirst through the gift of his life/Spirit, that our joy might be complete (John 15:11; 16:20, 22, 24; 17:13). His words on the cross, "I thirst" (John 19:28), recall the prayers of Israel that express Israel's thirst for God (Psalms 41/42:2; 62/63:3). The water that flows from the piercing of Jesus' side (John 19:31-37) symbolizes the God who alone quenches the thirst of Jesus and Israel, with whom Jesus is one, and whom he communicates to us through the mystery of his life-giving death.

Jesus proclaims to the Samaritan woman that he can quench the thirst of the human heart with a water that wells up to eternal life (John 4:14). In his account of the Last Judgment, the Son of Man identifies himself with both the physical and spiritual thirst of the human condition, revealing the divine will to satisfy it (Matthew 25:31-46).

In his vision of heaven, John tells us that the Lamb will be our shepherd, leading us to springs of living water in a new age when we shall never again hunger and thirst (Revelation 7:16).

# Oneness:

Metaphors for Spiritual Development

John Navone, S.J.



The biblical image of fullness is a supreme image of abundance—the maximum satiety that we can imagine for something. Fullness connotes an ideal or goal to which we aspire or long. It implies the perfection of not falling short of goodness.

In terms of the human life cycle, the ideal is to die “old and full of years” (Genesis 25:8; 35:29; Job 42:17), with one’s life expectancy having been completed. The same quality appears in nature, where in Pharaoh’s dream, the years of plenty are pictured as seven heads of grain that are healthy and full (Genesis 41:7). On a family level, the parent is happy whose “quiver is full” of arrows, that is, children (Psalm 144:5). In an agrarian society abundance is having barns “filled with every kind of provision” (Psalm 144:13). All these positive meanings of fullness converge in the book of Ruth, where the image of fullness counteracts the motif of emptiness at the levels of the individual, the family, society, and nature.

The physical quality of being full or complete can also have an ethical dimension, expressing the virtue of honesty. God required that people should use “a full and just weight” and “a full and just measure” (Deuteronomy 25:15). God wants “the full tithes” brought into the storehouse (Malachi 3:10). People who have stolen must make restitution in full (Leviticus 6:5).

Fullness also assumes a spiritual dimension in Scripture. It characterizes the actions and character of God. Thus God’s glory fills the earth (Psalm 72:19; Jeremiah 23:24; Isaiah 6:3; Ezekiel 43:5). So does God’s love (Psalm 119:64). God is “full of compassion” (Psalm 116:5) and “full . . . of mercy” (James 5:11).

#### *Fullness of the Work of the Holy Spirit*

Fullness is also a prominent motif in the work of the Holy Spirit, as reported in the New Testament. In the events surrounding the nativity, John the Baptist, Elizabeth, and Zechariah were “filled” with the Holy Spirit no fewer than eight times. Ephesians 5:18-20 exhorts believers to “be filled with the Spirit.” In all these passages the image implies being empowered by the Holy Spirit to an extraordinary degree and receiving that power from a source beyond oneself.

The ideal of being spiritually complete or whole applies to believers both individually and corporately. At a corporate level the kingdom of God will be complete when “the full number of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25). In a similar vein, Jesus could claim, “I have not lost one of those you gave me” (John 18:9), again expressing an ideal of the body of the redeemed being full, lacking nothing. As Christ’s body, the Church is “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23).

To be spiritually full and complete is also an individual goal. To be “filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19), to have God “fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Colossians 1:9), to “put on the full armor of God” (Ephesians 6:11), to “be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17)—this is the New Testament ideal for the Christian.

#### *The Fullness of the Coming Kingdom*

The motif of fullness in the double sense of abundance and completeness is prominent in millennial visions of the coming kingdom. In that day “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14). It will be a time when “you will have plenty to eat, until you are full” (Joel 2:24, 26). Furthermore, “the city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing” (Zechariah 8:5).

The biblical image of fullness is an ever-expanding vision of that for which the human spirit most longs. Fullness is associated with health, wholeness, satiety, maturity, blessing, wealth, justice, light, wisdom, time, value and restitution.

#### *Abundance*

Abundance in the Bible is either earthly or spiritual. The two are interrelated, for earthly abundance is consistently represented as a blessing from God, who gives it as a reward for covenant-keeping or simply out of grace. On a spiritual level the vocabulary of abundance is related to such large and overriding issues as salvation, miracles, reward, evil and honor to God. Images of abundance are employed throughout the Bible to inspire worship and obedience to God.

#### *Physical Abundance*

In keeping with the orientation of the Bible to place human life against a backdrop of spiritual reality, images of abundance are often associated with God’s blessings on righteousness. In Deuteronomy, God promises abundant blessings to the children of Israel if they obey, but punishment if they disobey. God brings the nation to the “good and spacious land” of Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 3:8) where if they please God, “The Lord will open . . . his rich storehouse, the heavens” to give blessings to them (Deuteronomy 28:12). However, if they do not return thanks by serving “the Lord their God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything,” God will give this abundant blessing to be enjoyed by other peoples (Deuteronomy 28:47-68).

God did bless Israel abundantly, especially through Solomon, the son of David who had pleased God so much. It pleased God greatly that Solomon asked for wisdom instead of riches, so God promised to bless him. He “gave Solomon wisdom, discernment and breadth of mind as vast as the sand that is on the seashore” (1 Kings 4:29). In addition, however, God promised also to give him what he did not ask for, namely, “both riches and honor all your life; no other king shall compare with you” (1 Kings 3:13). The country itself also had a share in that blessing, becoming “as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy” (1 Kings 4:20).

#### *God’s Abundant Kingdom*

Although images of abundance occur in reference to how God’s people will be blessed if they obey, they also occur in reference to the numbers of God’s chosen people. When God promises Abraham that he will make him the father of many nations, he explains the number of his descendants in terms of plenty. God declares, “Count the stars, if you are able to count

them. . . . So shall your descendants be" (Genesis 15:5). The beginning of this proliferation of Israelite people happens in Egypt, when the seventy people who followed Joseph into Egypt became a large number because they were "fruitful, and increased greatly, and multiplied, and became exceedingly mighty, so that the land was filled with them" (Exodus 1:7). Thus, God begins to fulfill his promise to make Abraham's descendants abundant in number.

In the New Testament, God promises similarly that many are waiting to be saved. Looking out at the multitude of people who were longingly seeking truth, Jesus commented to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38). In John, Jesus observes similarly that the fields "are white for harvest" (John 4:35). Therefore, God promises the believer hoping to evangelize that there are an abundance of people waiting to become the children of God.

#### *Abundance as a Metaphor for Spiritual Realities*

The imagery of an abundant harvest also appears in the Bible as a metaphor for spiritual realities or goodness. God's steadfast love (Psalms 5:7; 69:13) and goodness (Psalms 51:1; 69:16) are both abundant. So is his mercy (Psalms 51:1; 69:16) and power (Psalm 147:5). Isaiah speaks rapturously of the abundance of God's "salvation, wisdom and knowledge" (Isaiah 33:6). In the New Testament we read about "abundance of grace" (Romans 5:17), abundant consolation through Christ (2 Corinthians 2:4), faith that "is growing abundantly" (2 Thessalonians 1:3) and such Christian virtues as grace, peace, mercy and love that exist "in abundance" (2 Peter 1:2; Jude 2).

#### *The Abundant Life and Divine Fullness of Jesus*

Abundance characterizes the life and ministry of Jesus, who says that he has come that people "may have life . . . to the full" (John 10:10). The angel's greeting "Hail Mary, full of grace" (Luke 1:21) affirms the divine abundance at the Incarnation. This abundance characterizes the miracles that Jesus performed, symbolic of the magnitude of the promised blessings that Jesus was able to provide. When confronted by the hungry multitude of people, Jesus transformed five loaves

and two fishes into enough food to feed five thousand men along with additional women and children (Matthew 14:15-21). In fact, there was such abundance that afterward twelve baskets of leftovers were collected. Similarly, when the disciples could catch no fish on their own, Jesus commanded them to put their nets down into the deep water where they surprisingly caught so many fish that their nets began to break, and they filled two boats "so that they began to sink" (Luke 5:4-7).

Divine fullness is repeatedly associated with Jesus, where the added motif of fulfillment is a frequent part of the picture. Christ "came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Through Jesus, the Father showed the human race "the full extent of his love" (John 13:1). Paul draws on the theme of God's glory that fills the earth (Psalm 72:19; Isaiah 6:3; Jeremiah 23:24; Ezekiel 43:5) and is particularly pleased to dwell in Zion (Psalm 132:14) when he speaks of Christ as the locus where "God was pleased to have his fullness dwell" (Colossians 1:19) and "the wholeness of Deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9). In the scheme of salvation history, moreover, Christ came "when the fullness of time was come" (Galatians 4:4).

Abundance characterizes many of Jesus' parables: a hundredfold harvest, a mustard seed that become a tree reaching into heaven and providing habitation for birds, a messianic banquet, stewards who double their master's investment.

The crowning example of abundance appears in Revelation 21:9-27, where John describes the city of New Jerusalem that God has prepared for those who know him. This passage affirms the consummation of many promises of the Bible: abundant blessings await those who have faithfully obeyed God.

#### GRATITUDE OR RESENTMENT

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) contrasts God's generous abundance with human resentment. It tells the story of individuals who did not own property and did not have regular work. They were dependent on someone else's abundance enabling their employment. A vineyard owner arbitrarily picks out some of these people, and offers to pay them the going wage for a day's work in his





vineyard. The work that they had hoped for that morning became theirs from a power over which they have no control.

In a technical sense an injustice was done, because only a limited number of the potential employees were selected. However, the few left unhired did not complain about the few hired, reminding us that our sense of justice and injustice can be highly subjective. If something unfair goes in my favor, it is rare that you hear any kind of person protest. It is only when the unfairness goes against us that we tend to be indignant.

When the vineyard owner returns to the square, one hour before quitting time, he finds other day laborers, standing, hoping that somebody would hire them. When he asks why they are still there, they remind him that they cannot make work happen. Somebody had to do that for them and so he said, "You go to my vineyard also. I will pay you what is appropriate." That means that all those day laborers would get at least a portion of what each had hoped for when they had searched for work that morning.

At the end of the day when everyone lines up to be paid, there is a big surprise. Independently of the number of work hours, all are paid the same wage. All of them are given more than they had dared hope for when they had gone that morning to search for work. But when the early arrivals saw what they had received in comparison to what the late-comers had received, they were upset and accused the vineyard owner of unfairness. The vineyard owner replies that he has done nothing unjust. He has lived up to his end of the bargain in having paid them the sum that they had agreed to that morning. He affirms that he has the right to do what he likes with what is his

own, and he asks why they are begrudging him for his generosity.

The last question is the key to understanding the story. There is a vast difference between looking at life in terms of entitlement and looking at life through the lens of generosity. It might well go back to the very beginning of creation with the question, "How did any of us come to be here in the first place?" Why is there something rather than nothing? In other words, why did creation ever get called out of nothing into being? The Bible answers that question. If we go back to Genesis, it is clear that in that beginning-less beginning, back before there was anything except God, this Mystery who is life itself, that One must have said within Itself, "This wonder of aliveness that I am is simply too good to keep to myself. I want others to know the ecstasy of being and living and doing."

And so God began to create, not to get something for Godself, but to give something of Godself. In other words, boundless generosity is the source from which all creation comes, and because of this generosity, the truth is that none of us, if we look deeply into our lives, can claim that we have earned this existence by our own efforts. Each one of us is given life as a gift. Our birth is a windfall, a coming into possession of something that is not ours by deserving, but something that has been given to us. If we will stay in touch with that primal grace that marks the beginning of all of our lives, then we have reasons to be grateful no matter what our particular circumstances are. We no longer think in terms of our entitlement and of God's having to be fair, because all life is rooted in grace. All is gift. We have reason to believe that the sheer wonder of aliveness is an unending source of joy and of gratitude.

The parable of the laborers in the vineyard implies the formula for a life of resentment and misery. If the first workers had stayed in touch with the all-encompassing primal grace of the morning event, if they had realized that before they woke up they could not have made work happen, then they would have rejoiced all day long. Their resentment started when they shifted their focus from that primal grace and began the side-long glance of comparing. They looked at what others had been given instead of what they had received and, when they began to compare, the side-long glance of envy turned the joy of the morning into curdled resentment at the end of the day.

We all run the same risk. If we want to look at our aliveness in terms of the particularities of what we have—our kind of body, our financial resources, our talents—and then compare ourselves with what others have, we will always find people who have more than we do and, therefore, we can be indignant. We can say life is not fair. If we compare ourselves to others, there are always people who have life circumstances different from ourselves.

The parable also implies the formula for how to live our life in joy, and that is to compare our particular situation at this moment with what we had a year before we were born: the year we did not exist, had no body. We had no more way of making ourselves an alive entity than those day laborers of the parable had ways to make work appear. As soon as we stay in touch with the fact that our birth is sheer windfall, that our life has been given to us as an incredible gift, then something more profound than mere justice or fairness become the way that we look at this mystery of existence. When we recall that life is a gift and birth a windfall, then we can begin to be generous with our lives just as God is generous with God's life. God's joyful self-giving and generosity manifest God's holiness throughout all creation. Our being generous is the secret to our being the joyful images and likenesses of God.

#### *Confidence in God's Boundless Generosity*

The sense of our life as a gift that we have been freely given and do not deserve engenders a gratitude for being alive. Our awareness of God's boundless generosity grounds our sense of "enoughness." It gives us the confidence that, just as there has been enough, there will always be more where that came from, enabling us to give. It enables us to face death as a transition with the assurance that the best is yet to come. The generosity and abundance of God that brought us into existence, from nothing into life within the womb and beyond the womb into the world of time and space, will not cease to carry us forward into new life. If God has abundantly provided everything for us before death, there is no reason for not believing that he will continue to provide abundantly for all that follows death. The joys of the past foreshadow the boundless joys that God has prepared for us after death. Our awareness of abundance before death gives us the confidence to look for the same boundless abundance after death.

All is grace, flowing from God's boundless generosity like the scent of lilacs, like an artesian well overflowing throughout all creation. We are floating on a river of grace. The air we breathe, the ground upon which we stand, is gift. We did not

*When we recall that life is a gift and birth a windfall, then we can begin to be generous with our lives just as God is generous with God's life.*

*The tension between love and fear characterizes human life. Love is confidence that there is enough, and fear is the suspicion that there is not enough.*

create the two cells in our mother's womb for our existence. That was gift. Just as we did not control the generous and boundless abundance that brought us into existence, we do not control the Source of that generous abundance that enables our peace and confidence in the face of death. Because all is given, there is no basis for anxiety or fear before death. The fear of scarcity or insufficiency that prevents our enjoying life prevents our accepting death. Where there is love, there is no room for fear, for love drives out fear (1 John 4:18). Where there is God's love, there is both freedom from the anxiety of self-preoccupation and freedom for the enjoyment of God's boundless goodness. Where there is love, God is enough for our peace and joy. We can live self-preoccupied lives, crippled by anxiety and the fear of scarcity, or we can enjoy the fullness of life in loving gratitude for God's boundless generosity. With a sense of entitlement, we can forever demand to live life on our own terms, or, with a sense of gratitude, we can joyfully accept life on God's terms. The advent of God's abundance enables our exodus from the insecurity of scarcity.

The tension between love and fear characterizes human life. Love is confidence that there is enough, and fear is the suspicion that there is not enough. If we live out of a sense of scarcity, then we are always trying to acquire and possess. We are always trying to hoard. We are always being stingy, and we can at times even become violent. But if we are living out of a sense of the fullness of creation, which is at the heart of the biblical vision, then we can be generous. God joyfully gives out of utter abundance, and we are made in the image and likeness of the Generous One to become joyfully generous persons. The fear of scarcity incapacitates our generosity. We can give not with any kind of fear, but with the confidence that there is more where that came from. In this context, perhaps the most creative people are the ones who are the most grateful and confident about where life comes from and what life is. They are not stymied by the sense that this is not enough. They do not feel they have to get or take something from you nor that they have to keep something from you.

#### *Sharing the Vision and Spirit of the Generous One*

God freely does what God does for the love of it. God is not forced. God knows, loves, and enjoys what God is and does. God creates not because God has to create, but for the sheer love of creating. We have been made in God's image and likeness to do what we do in God's Spirit of joyful love; to be grateful for all that God is doing. That is where we find our greatest joy and happiness. Every gift we have been given is a present for others. The advent of our abundance enables the exodus of others from the condition of scarcity and insecurity.

We have not earned our way into this world; rather, our lives were given to us. We have all been given the gift of life through the generosity of a Mystery other than what we are. Remembering that all persons we meet are here because God wants them here enables us to see them with the eyes of the heart, as fellow gifts of God, worthy of our deepest gratitude and affection. The fact that we are still breathing means that God still wants us to be here.



Although we are all different on the surface, if we look deeply enough with the eyes of the heart into our true identity, we are much more alike than different. We all need food, we all need the oxygen that we did not create. We are all being sustained by a Mystery not ourselves. If we can quit focusing on the ways that we are different we may see with the eyes of love our common source, the Generous One.

We can express the tension in our lives between the pull of God's grace and call and its counter-pulls as follows:

- Gratitude without claims on God vs. resentment and entitlement
- Love and confidence vs. fear and anxiety
- A sense of abundance vs. a sense of scarcity
- Beholding the Generous One vs. self-preoccupation
- Enjoying life on God's terms vs. demanding life on our terms
- God is fair vs. God is unfair
- Generosity vs. stinginess and hoarding
- Ecstasy vs. entropy.

To sum up the consolation we derive from God's boundless generosity, we could not do better than ponder the Christian meaning of Psalm 23. John's Gospel tells us of the good shepherd who gives his life for his sheep, the true bread from heaven, the living water, the wine of the Messianic banquet—all echoes of images found in the psalm.

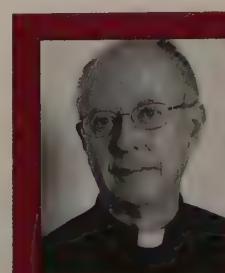
The Lord is my shepherd;  
There is nothing I shall want.  
Fresh and green are the pastures

Where he gives me repose.  
Near restful waters he leads me,  
To revive my drooping spirit.

He guides me along the right path;  
He is true to his name.  
If I should walk in the valley of darkness  
No evil would I fear.  
You are there with your crook and your staff;  
With these you give me comfort.

Your have prepared a banquet for me  
In the sight of my foes.  
My head you have anointed with oil;  
My cup is overflowing.  
Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me  
all the days of my life.  
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell  
for ever and ever.

(*The Psalms, A New Translation*. London: Collins, 1963)



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# Feeeling with God

With love God may be gotten  
and holden;  
With thought and understanding  
never.

*The Cloud of Unknowing*

I remember a proof for the existence of God that I learned in grade school. God is the greatest being that can be conceived. A being that actually exists is greater than one that is simply a thought. Therefore, God exists! It was impressive thinking to my young mind. I had already learned the

Baltimore Catechism. "Who is God? God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence." All such ideas seemed important to me. Clearly all the adults were convinced that one of the most important things in life was to think the right way about God.

Right thinking was evidenced in right action. I did my best to make it clear I was in the right with all the adults I knew. I showed my faith in good works. I was kind, eager to please, careful never to harm; I became an

altar boy, went to daily Mass. I was making sure God would be pleased with me—or at least wouldn't punish me. What that really meant was that I could be safe with all those powerful adults. God was one of their ideas. I went along with them. *Believe right. Act right. Earn love—or at least avoid pain.*

Those ideas carried me right through high school and into a religious order. It wasn't until college that I came across the idea that God could be



# Participation in Incarnation

Allan Schnarr, Ph.D.

experienced. I believe it was in the writings of Gabriel Marcel. I remember being astounded and excited by the possibility that I could experience the “infinitely perfect.” It was an idea that opened a door. Around the same time I began to experience Ignatian prayer. I was quite intrigued by Ignatius’s encouragement to take time with an image, to notice the movements that occurred within myself. A couple years earlier I’d been on a “sensitivity marathon” with a priest-psychologist, and had my scholastic rationality rocked by the reality of

feelings. When I got to my thirty-day retreat it became clear to me that I was longing to feel the love of God. I found my way there and made myself at home.

Several years later, while studying theology, I did a paper on Christian mysticism. The quote at the start of this article from *The Cloud of Unknowing* became the centerpiece of my thesis. The path of every mystic began with the attempt to approach God with thinking. The inevitable frustration and emptiness of this led to the death of

thinking as the pathway to God. This paschal experience opened the mystic’s heart to the need to feel love. It was there that God could be experienced. The infinite became intimate in feeling beloved.

## God is a person—and a relationship

The proof that you are sons and daughters is that God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts: the Spirit that cries, Abba, Father! Galatians 4:6

# *God feels joy when the beloved is joyful; God feels sorrow when the beloved is in distress.*

I relished the *experience* of the love of God. I planted myself there for an hour a day, drinking it into my cells. A couple years into this intimacy I took a theology class entitled "The Doctrine of God." The professor taught it from his Latin notes, all based on ideas from the Council of Trent. I sat there and wrote my own version of sarcastic wisdom literature. "Woe unto him who chains God inside his thoughts, he will languish in the pettiness of his own mind." I was angry. What great thinkers did to God seemed a violation to me. How absurd. To claim power over the all-powerful with raw, rational precision! Just because it was rational didn't make it real.

Ironically, it was in that class that my mind and heart found a connection. It happened as I learned the classical doctrine of the Trinity. I sifted through *enhypostatic* or some such term, and its fellows, to what fascinated me. The Father, all alone and longing for someone, emptied his love into the creation of a Beloved, the Son. The Son, overflowing with receiving the fullness of this love, returned it to its source. The love coursing between them was so profound, with such a life of its own, that it too was a person, the Holy Spirit. This exchange between the Father and Son became the focus for my experience of the love of God.

When I made my eight-day retreat to discern my call to priesthood, just before being ordained, I spent five hours a day in what has since been my internal home. I breathed in, imagining myself beloved, receiving God's love. I breathed out, returning this love to its source. My mantra was simply, "Receiving" and "Releasing."

I had found my way to the experience of God for which I had been longing. I came to know God as the person who loves me, God as Lover; and as the person whom I love, the Beloved; and as the relationship between us, the energetic flow of this love, the Spirit. And I came to know myself as Beloved, Lover and Spirit of Love. To this day, I experience myself as the image of the One whom I love. Whenever I turn in need to this love, the experience is there. It's

like an embrace from the inside and outside at the same time. This embrace makes all well.

## **Spirit is the experience of God.**

I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, the Spirit of truth...you know him because he is with you, he is in you.

John 14:16, 17

The radical implications of the experience of God have grown in clarity for me over time. While studying theology, another groundbreaking discovery came as I was studying Abraham Heschel's book, *The Prophets*. Heschel asserted that *the prophets felt God's feelings*. To me, this was a revolutionary concept. God had feelings! God was not infinite, immutable perfection, but vulnerable, intimately involved with his/her creation. God was affected by what happened with human beings. Well, of course God was affected. God was a person in relationship, and God was the relationship. This personal God felt what was happening in the relationship. This meshed with my understanding of a God who was love. In his/her love, God was empathically connected with the beloved. How could it be otherwise?

This means God feels joy when the beloved is joyful; God feels sorrow when the beloved is in distress. This makes sense of the immanence of God in salvation history. God is an empathic person, intimately present and responsive to the pleasure and pain of the beloved. God feels with the one God loves. To me this means that the energy in God's feelings is the Spirit that connects God with the beloved.

Spirit is the intimate connection  
that is felt  
when two or more persons  
experience love.

Spirit is the emotion  
experienced in relationship,  
the energy of divine love,  
flowing from within,  
connecting each of us in God.

When I am in touch with my feelings, I am experiencing the movement

of the Spirit within me. Pleasure is the feeling I have when love is secure, and hopefully, lasting. Pain, fear and anger are the feelings I experience when love has been lost or is threatened. At any moment in relationship, if I allow awareness, *I am feeling the meaning of the relationship*, in terms of the relative presence or absence of love.

God is the person having the feelings. God is the personal energy, the Spirit experienced in the feelings. *Whenever I am aware of my feelings, I am feeling with God, just as God is feeling with me.* I am experiencing the flow of God's Spirit through my being.

#### **Incarnation is God's revelation.**

To have seen me is to have seen the Father, so how can you say, "Let us see the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?

John 14: 9, 10.

The God of love does more than simply experience feelings. Though feelings have a life of their own, just as the Spirit blows where it will, love is more than a feeling. A person is more than a channel for the flow of the Spirit. Feelings do not determine what is done with them. *To be a person is to join awareness with choice.* God experiences the flowing movement of the Spirit, and God decides what to do with what is being felt. A person is not determined by the Spirit being felt. A person chooses how to express the emotion so that it is an authentic revelation of love.

*Incarnation happens through every choice to reveal how the Spirit is moving at the moment.* This is how Jesus is the revelation of God, and how I am the revelation of God, and how you are. Every person at every moment has the opportunity to make the word flesh. I do it when I choose to reveal the meaning of God's movement within me. I do it by saying who I am.

When I was studying theology and took a course in the Old Testament, the professor, Marcel Gervais, provided me with another revolutionary insight. The foundational event for the Jewish people was the Exodus. It began with

Moses' experience at the burning bush. Here was a former member of the power elite, once able to control others with his thoughts about what was right. That image of himself was shattered when he discovered he was born a slave. Lost and wandering, he experienced something that boggled his mind. A bush was burning—and not being consumed. Moses recognized the experience of the sacred, and entered an intimate personal relationship with God.

God told him he was not a slave—and neither were his people. They were free. Moses was to tell them this and lead them into freedom. Moses said he needed a name for God that would be powerful enough to scare the powers-that-were into letting them go. God said, "I am who I say I am." He gave Moses the divine essence of personal freedom. It was enough to change the consciousness of a whole people.

Many generations later, Gervais said, God's revelation to Moses became the core of the self-understanding of Jesus. When Jesus used the name of God in reference to himself, he was accused of blasphemy. Such accusations gave the would-be power brokers no power over Jesus. They did not get to say who he was. This divine power was given to him in his intimate relationship with the infinite God, a relationship so tender that he called God, Abba, something like, Daddy Dear.

I am who I say I am. This is the power of co-creation that I join with whenever I choose what to do with the energy stirring within me. I allow awareness of my experience of the Spirit in this moment. I feel the meaning of the love within my relationship(s) right now. I choose how I reveal the love that I am embodying. I am who I say I am. I am the revelation of God.

I am not saying that you have to agree with my thoughts, or that you must see God in me. I am saying that you do not get to tell me who God is for me. You are not the judge of my experience of God, nor I of yours. I can only say who I am. However, if we allow ourselves to enter into a relationship of emotional honesty, if we

***To be a person is to join awareness with choice.***

allow the Spirit of love to flow between us, then we will discover the revelation of God in each other. Indeed, our relationship itself will be for us a revelation of God.

### We feel the movement of God in our bodies.

Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God.

1 Corinthians 6:19

The body is sacred because it is the medium of revelation. Every artist needs a medium to manifest each moment of creation. So it is with the divine creator in me. My choices embody who I say that I am.

Every body incarnates emotional truth. The body does not lie. In it I experience the truth, moment to moment, of who I am in relationship to all that is other. Through it, moment to moment, I am choosing to make known to others who it is that I am. The more I try to shut down this inner truth, the more my body is in trouble. Medical research is making it increasingly clear that the psychosomatic component of every illness comes from blocking the flow of emotional energy through the body.

Unresolved fear of feeling shuts down the movement of the Spirit. In the body, the truth will win out; if not in conscious authenticity, then in unconscious symptomatology. The Spirit finds a way to move in the stifled body, crying out for healing.

It is in my body that the truth sets me free. My body attunes my awareness to the flow of the Spirit. Just as the ear can cultivate an appreciation of music, so embodied emotional awareness can be steadily refined. My bodily experience of the Spirit can be like being exquisitely attentive to a magnificent symphony—one being generated by the whole universe. And my body is for me the instrument with which I weave my part into the entrancing flow.

My body locates for me my place in the larger body of which I am a part. For example, I had lived for more than

twenty years as a Canadian immigrant in Chicago when 9/11 happened. As I was spellbound with the TV coverage for the next couple of days, I kept noticing the moments when I was most deeply moved. As I listened within, it became clear to me that I was resonating deeply with the suffering, the peril, and the heroism of my fellow Americans. These feelings told me I needed to become a citizen. I understood where I belonged by listening to my body.

*I feel the meaning in my body.* Each and every moment, experiencing the Spirit moving through me tells me where I fit in the larger whole. Whether focused on one relationship or a whole network of relationships, I feel the meaning of my connection with those I allow myself to love.

- I haven't seen my daughter in a while. I miss her.
- Many of my brothers and sisters are traveling a long way to my daughter's wedding. I'm grateful and excited.
- Our staff at Claret Center is working well together on the creation of an e-newsletter. I'm deeply satisfied.
- An editor is taking time to carefully consider my book proposal. I'm hopeful.
- A therapy client has just said goodbye after acknowledging amazement at her transformation in only a year. I'm sad and fulfilled.

Whatever the meaning of any experience, I feel it in my body. It's there that the Spirit moves. It's that movement to which I respond. I call my daughter. I email my siblings. I'm generous and joyful with contributions to the Claret staff project. And so on.

- I feel the meaning.*
- I understand.*
- I create an intention.*
- I embody my response.*

My body reveals to others where I am in relationship to them. My body reveals my reflection of the Spirit between us.

### Childlike is Godlike.

Let the children come to me ... for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs.  
Matthew 19:14

Children live in their bodies. The Spirit flows through them as naturally as the river to the sea. Unless they have been shut down by trauma or poisonous pedagogy, they embody their feelings. When happy, they bubble. When sad, they droop. When angry, they stomp. When afraid, they hide. When affectionate, they hug. Their embodiment of truth is natural.

Children live in the heart of life, in the raw reality of the paschal mystery. Until their childhood is curtailed, they openly feel the losses—and the gains. Until they are forced to become little adults, they flow smoothly through the joys and sorrows of passing paschal moments. Until the need for control takes them over, they die and rise again many times a day. As soon as they follow adults into playing God, they begin the alienation from their bodies. Once they are caught in trying to control what happens next, their bodies are steadily lost. The free flow of the Spirit becomes increasingly elusive. Inexorably the mind takes over. God becomes less and less a person to be experienced, and more and more an idea to get right. Dogma displaces devotion.

Childlike is Godlike because death and rebirth is a natural process. As with the seasons, so with the cycle of life. Every bloom will fade. Every plant will go to seed. All seeds must transform if new life is to flower again. Nothing new is born unless something old dies. The passage of time is eternal renewal. Every present moment fades into the past. Every now something new comes into being. Childlike people get this. They know how to let go what passes, and how to allow the surprise of what is coming to be. They can surrender to and engage in what God is doing as creation continues to unfold.

Childlike means joining God in what God is doing. God's activity is love, meaning God is active, making all well. When I love someone, I want all to be



well for them. When all is well, joy lasts and sorrow passes. Love attunes itself to the feelings that track the cycle of life. Love joins in the joy so that what is life-giving may endure. Love holds sorrow with compassion so that what is not life-giving may pass. Love feels the movement in every moment of the paschal mystery. A childlike person surrenders to this flow of love, learning how to join in, how to be an active participant in making all well.

When my daughter was four years old she showed me the clarity of her participation in this mystery. She'd been running through the house, fell and hurt herself (not seriously), and was whimpering. I walked right by her, proud of myself for holding back the "serves you right" that I regularly heard growing up. She went and got some compassion from her mom, and then a few minutes later stood defiantly before me. "Daddee, I am so angry wiff you," she

said. "You saw me hurting, and walked by like you didn't even care."

At her young age, she felt the meaning in her body. She found what she needed for the pain to pass. Then she moved on to the anger, and brought it to me, confronting me with a behavior that needed to pass. Reconciliation came through the initiative of a four-year old, simply by trusting the love present in her feelings. She didn't recognize the activity of God, nor did I notice how we were participating in the mystery. She was simply childlike, calling me to be the same.

Childlike means living each moment in the flow of the Spirit. It means feeling the meaning of each moment rather than predetermining what must be felt. Childlike means recognition of oneself as a small part of something big and wonderful. It means openness to mystery rather than controlling a tiny piece as if it were the

whole thing. Childlike is surrender and engagement. It is participation in the word being made flesh.

### **Feeling with God**

Glory be to the one  
whose power working in us  
can do infinitely more  
than we can ask or imagine.  
Ephesians 3:20

The more at home I am with my feelings, the more I live in my body, the more open I am to the presence of God. The radical truth of incarnation is the presence of God in my body, in my feelings. Whether or not I'm aware of it, God is with me, God is in me, God is flowing through me.

How do I grow to believe God is with me at every moment? How do I find the presence of God in my feelings? I do it with a daily review, wherein I feel the meaning of significant moments of my day. It is a

*The more at home I am with my feelings, the more I live in my body, the more open I am to the presence of God.*



form of the Practice of the Presence of God. I call it—surprise—feeling with God. You too may wish to follow these steps and thus participate more fully in the incarnation.

#### **Feeling with God**

##### **1. Prepare**

- Find a quiet setting where you will be undisturbed.
- Place your body in a position that supports being comfortable and alert.
- Breathe and relax, simply noticing whatever comes into your awareness in the present moment. Whether you notice sensations, thoughts or feelings, simply let them come and go. Stay with this until you have settled into being present with yourself.

##### **2. Breathe with God**

- Become aware of the presence of God, the presence of love, within you and all around you. If you like, imagine those who love you gathered in a circle around you.
- Breathe in, slowly and deeply, choosing to embody these words: *Receiving love, making all well.*

(Imagine and feel the love of God as energy with a color or sound flowing into every cell in your body.)

- Breathe out, slowly and deeply, choosing to embody these words: *Releasing love, making all well.*

(Imagine and feel the love of God flowing through you to all those who are in need.)

- Stay with this mantra until you feel well-grounded in your body, in the experience of the God who is love.

##### **3. Feel the Meaning**

- Now, allow the Spirit of love, as it flows with your breath, to bring you back to significant moments of your day.
- Feel yourself once again in a specific moment where your feelings were clear. Notice feeling content, joyful, scared, angry, sad, in pain or any variations on these. Let the feeling connect with your breath. Feel it in your body. Let it be there. Honor it.
- Feel the meaning. As you breathe with the feeling, open your mind to what it



tells you about your relationship to whomever or whatever it is that you love in that moment. Acknowledge the presence of God in this moment of love.

- When you are satisfied with feeling the meaning of one particular emotion, move on to another. Repeat until it is enough for now.

#### 4. Sifting

- When you come upon an experience where something important is happening and you are unsure what you are feeling, spend a little time listening to yourself.
- With your awareness anchored in your breath, let yourself be in the experience once again, as if it were happening now. Tune your senses into what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting, doing.
- As you're in the experience, notice what thoughts move through your mind. Just let the thoughts come and go. If they carry you away, come back to your breath and your internal image of what is happening.
- As you breathe, allowing your thoughts to come and go, notice any movement of

energy or internal sensation in your body. If you didn't hold yourself back, what does your body feel like doing?

- *Stay with it!* Bring yourself back to awareness of your breath, your thoughts, and your bodily sensations. Be in the experience with an open heart, welcoming whatever way the Spirit is moving in your body.
- When the feeling becomes clear, return to Feeling the Meaning, number 3 above.

#### 5. Feeling Now

- Let go of reviewing prior experiences. Empty your thoughts by simply focusing on the rhythm of your breath.
- As you breathe, notice what you are feeling at this moment. Recognize the presence of God in this feeling.
- Acknowledge what the feeling tells you about the meaning of your day.

#### 6. Set an Intention

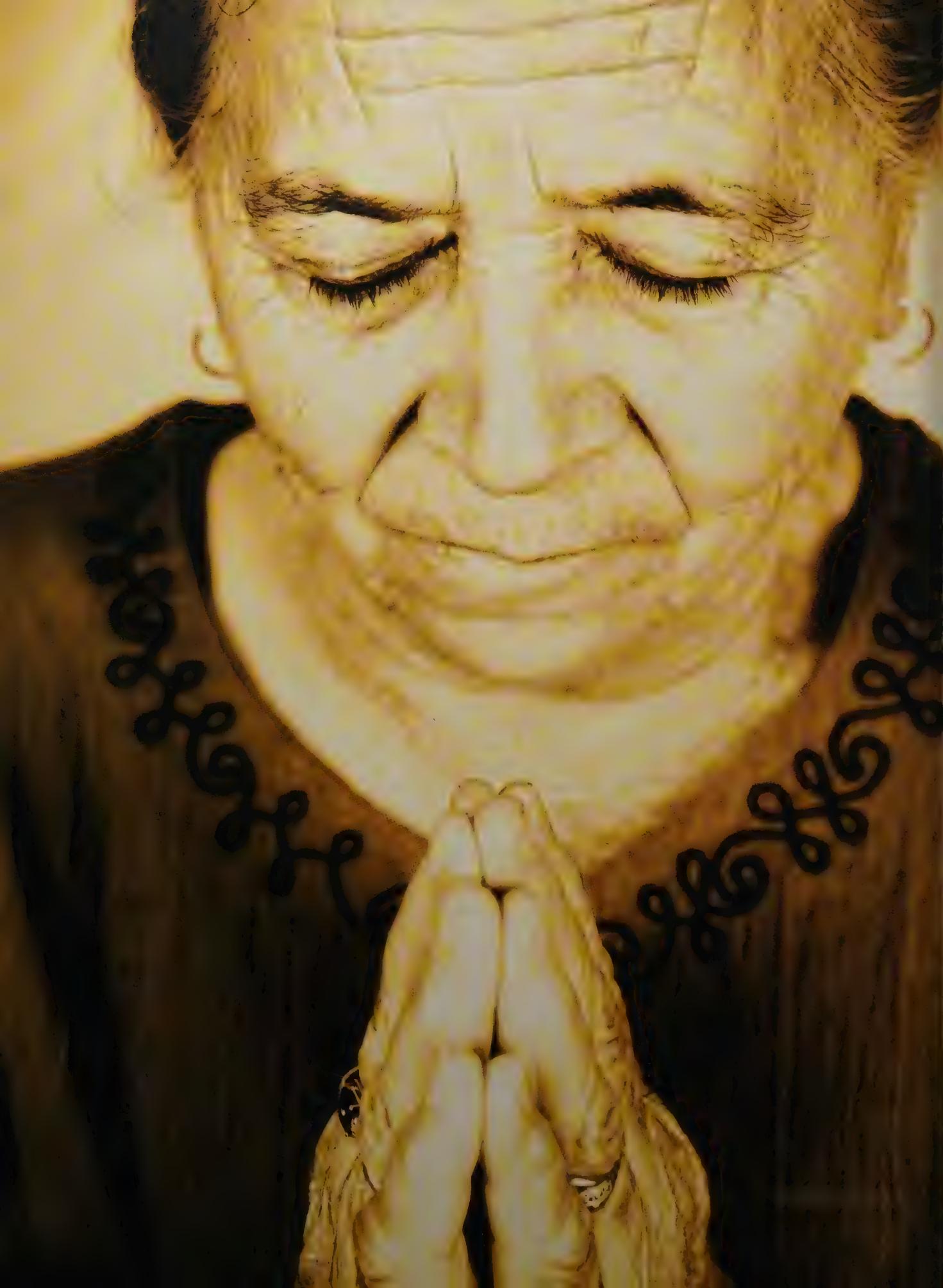
- In closing, identify how you would like to be more aware of the presence of God in your day tomorrow.

- Invite the Spirit to call to and inform your awareness so that you may Feel the Meaning when God's love is moving through you.
- End your daily review.

Out of God's infinite glory may you receive  
the power of her Spirit for your  
hidden self to grow strong ...  
and then planted in love and  
built on love ...  
may you be filled with the utter  
fullness of God.  
Ephesians 3:16-20.



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# *Death with Dignity and Grace: A Congregational Option*

**Mary Beth Moore, S.C.**

## **THEY BEAR FRUIT, EVEN IN OLD AGE**

Sister Frances began an office of outreach to immigrants at the age of 69 and is planning its tenth anniversary. Sister Joan founded a ministry to combat human trafficking at the age of 61. Sister Eileen, age 69, works as a chaplain at an urban women's prison. At 77, Sister Assunta combines summers as a spiritual director with her full-time ministry as a religious education coordinator. Add to these the retired sisters in good health who volunteer in schools, parishes, soup kitchens, nursing homes and environmental projects. In addition, scores of sisters set aside time for advocacy for the poor, writing letters and emails to lawmakers to insist upon honoring the common good. Anyone familiar with religious life can add her or his own examples of ministry that sisters and brothers are doing in their later years. This is a testimony to vibrant life, a real contribution to our world. Religious embrace these ministries joyfully, until serious ill health bears them to the new moment of being led "where [they] do not wish to go" (John 21:18).

With the rare exception, those of us who opted to remain in religious life do indeed believe in it. We live a life where prayer has a central role. We believe in the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and have deepened our understanding of these century-old counsels as a path of human liberation. We cherish living in community, with all its challenges. Community life today takes many forms, but all include a specific identity as a community member, belonging to a congregation with its own charism, history and traditions. Community life is no abstraction. It entails a commitment to unique women or men who form an integral part of one's life, not through ties of blood or natural attraction, but because of our shared vocation. We all know the importance of supporting one another's solitude, celebrating one another's joys, comforting each other in sorrow and standing by in times of sickness unto the last.

Religious life has been right for us. As we reflect on our experience and discern the signs of the times, it is possible to trust that this ecclesial lifestyle will continue. New and old

congregations flourish in the developing countries. Some North American congregations that were founded in the last 40 years are attracting young candidates who want fixed daily prayer, religious habits and an assigned ministry. Some contemplative communities have integrated newer and younger members. It has become conventional wisdom to state that religious life will continue, albeit with far fewer members. In the past forty years, a large body of literature has grown up commenting on religious. Theologians of stature, biblical scholars and students of spirituality have put forth many a verb beginning with "re": renew, refound, reconfigure, return to roots. Add transform and transcend into the discourse.

And yet, there hangs over us a shadow of uncertainty. What must and what should happen in religious life is commented on extensively; what is happening is described rather accurately by sociologists. The disappearance of sisters and brothers in the developed world increases yearly. The vast majority of religious communities have very few, or no new members. But there is one verb tense that is neglected: what will happen in religious life? While an imaginative sort may spin out a scenario that is full of promise and hope, it leaves many religious congregations in the lurch. For there is a more concrete set of questions that is devilishly hard to respond to: What will happen to my religious congregation? What will happen and how will it happen and who will make it happen? Will my congregation die out?

## **THE POSSIBILITY THAT ONE'S OWN CONGREGATION MAY END IN TIME**

In a keynote address entitled, "A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century" given at the national meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in 2007, Laurie Brink, O.P., discusses the possibility of a congregation's discerning the direction of "death with dignity and grace." This suggestion is part of her richly detailed assessment of current options for religious congregations. She offers this option as one among four, noting emphatically how hard it is for a

congregation to choose any one of them and “commit together to that end.” In her presentation, Brink does what a biblical scholar does best: she digs into death with dignity as a real possibility and finds a scripture story to validate such a choice and inspire action. The story is that of Abraham’s wife Sarah. Brink presents Sarah’s life vividly: a woman who knows only patriarchy, who treats her husband’s concubine cruelly, who struggles through nonetheless and dies at the age of one hundred twenty-seven. The story presents us with the elements that accompany a good death. These are, according to Brink:

- Recognition of life’s achievements—here summarized in Sarah’s age at death.
- Appropriate mourning rituals to mark her passing from this state of living to a new state of death.
- Burial—which includes both making preparation and the actual putting to rest.
- Continuation of life—Abraham seeks a wife for his son.

What would it mean to appropriate this story as a paradigm for an individual congregation that discerns death with dignity and grace as the future option they choose? Can such a choice be a positive one for a congregation? Responding to these questions means struggling with contradictions and ultimately, looking to the deep mystery of the cross and resurrection.

The first step for a congregation is probably the hardest. Humanly speaking we reflexively recoil from death. To articulate that death with dignity and grace is an option for *my* congregation takes real courage. The congregation would have to acknowledge the spiritual and psychological dimensions of this choice. Community members may well feel guilt about considering the end of the congregation. Perhaps it is my fault, our fault, and many reasons can bubble up. We should have been more contemplative, or more committed to the poor; we shouldn’t have closed that school; we should have closed that school. Or the concern that is broadest: we should have tried harder. Members would need to acknowledge that while leadership or membership may have made missteps over the years, it is the sweep of historical forces in the church and in society that have brought us to this unique moment. There could even be jealousy of congregations who have made another choice, those who do have new members and seem to be turning a corner to move into the future. This doesn’t mean that their charism is better than one’s own. We need to embrace the reality that we do not own a charism, and that any gift of the Spirit could emerge in an entirely unexpected way. But we are getting ahead of ourselves—that has to do with resurrection.

Another practical difficulty in choosing death with dignity and grace for the congregation is that a corporate or institutional death is not the same as individual death. One would hope that members would remain active, deeply committed to prayer and good works. In fact, members could name the narcissism involved in any tendency to think that just because one’s congregation is ending, God’s mysterious work in the world, and one’s own responsibility within that work has ended. The choice to face the historical end of the congregation is a commitment to a process that could last many years.

*To articulate that death with dignity and grace is an option for my congregation takes real courage.*

But let's look again at the biblical story of Sarah that Brink has set forth. In discerning its end, the congregation must "recognize the achievements of a lifetime." For Sarah that included her 127 years. For a congregation, the sweep of achievements from the founders right up to those new ministries addressing the needs of the 21st century must all be duly recognized. The essentially hidden efficacy of incalculable relationships, forged in prayer and action cannot be measured, but can be illuminated in creative ways. This could be a liberating and life-giving project if undertaken as a work of the Spirit.

How could a congregation create "appropriate mourning rituals to mark [its] passing from this state of living to a new state of death?" This challenge touches on the sorrow that must accompany a new state of being, a state for which no one has an exact knowledge. It is sad to acknowledge that a congregation is dying. But sadness does not have to be depression. Ritual, shared mourning, a common discourse and vocabulary to move through an end process can enable members to handle the difficulties and uncertainties that are an essential aspect of dying. In fact the whole point of making a choice as a congregation is to enable members to work through grief together, rather than cover up or ignore the reality of dying. Instead, members could experience solidarity as they embark on a courageous process together in which they share their struggles and speak of their concerns.

The next aspect of death with dignity and grace suggested by the story of Sarah is "Burial—which includes both making preparation and the actual putting to rest." The word burial falls harshly on the ear and could oppress the heart. It is important to reiterate that a congregation is not burying its charism, or the spiritual power that transcends death. As with Sarah, as with all things mortal, there comes a time when tangible, visible presence is no more. Making preparation for the tangible, physical end of one's congregation could be a most loving and responsible action. And let's be clear, this preparation is real work. It entails first and foremost provision for the welfare of all members to the end of life; disposition of congregational resources—cash, property and ministries; communication with church authority and the people of God to foster understanding of the congregation's decision. This preparation is a process that each congregation must monitor according to its particular situation.

The final dimension of a good death is "continuation of life." In the biblical story, Abraham rises up in the midst of grief for Sarah and seeks a wife for his son. In the context of Genesis, the search for a wife in the next generation has to do with fulfilling the role of matriarch, an important one for the community.

What will continuation of life look like for a congregation that is moving toward its final end? This question is the one that calls forth the greatest creativity and faith. As Bishop Desmond Tutu once said, "Death is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian." Dare we say death is not the worst thing that can happen to a congregation? Tutu is calling up the Paschal mystery, the crossing from death to life, first traversed by our God and brother, Jesus. The example of the nonviolent Jesus shows

us that loving to the end, unto death, is preferable to inflicting violence. Accepting death is preferable to betraying friends or betraying the deep beliefs that give life meaning. Embracing death in the firm hope of resurrection is the central challenge for every Christian.

Religious women and men are already moving toward a continuation of life, the life of the Spirit expressed in their charism. The phenomenon of lay associates in its many forms is perhaps the most obvious example. Many congregations are finding ways to deepen the understanding of their charism in the institutions they founded—schools, universities, hospitals, social service agencies—many of which are already under lay auspices. Religious are engaged in the formation of lay leadership, the struggle for justice, the transformation of ecclesial structures, the healing of Earth. When a congregation chooses death with dignity and grace, there may be corporate ways of expressing the continuation of life. Some examples are the institutional support of a congregation in the developing world, setting up a trust fund for the kind of ministries the congregation specialized in, or bequeathing congregation land in a way that honors our new understanding of Earth as a living entity. Doubtless there are many more ways a congregation will give expression to the continuity of life once it is set upon its course. We know in our heads that life will go on without us. Yet the very life force that flows within us hides that knowledge from the heart. The story of Abraham, our father in faith, has endured, and the role of the matriarch Sarah, with all her limitations, has been re-discovered in our time. As we see, both are still teaching us ways to map our present reality. Can we trust that the spirit of each religious congregation will live on, however mysteriously, even if its physical life ends? If so, to choose death with dignity and grace could be a loving choice for some congregations.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>According to CARA-Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, there were 115,386 religious sisters in 1985, and 55,944 in 2011. The number of religious brothers changed from 7,544 to 4,606 in the same period.

<sup>2</sup>"A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century," Laurie Brink, O.P. Paper given at the LCWR national meeting, August, 2007. Brink's excellent article offers three other options for the future of religious life, each with biblical underpinning: acquiescence to other's expectations, sojourning in a new land not yet known, and reconciliation for the sake of mission. <http://www.lcwr.org/lcwranualassembly/2007assembly/Keynote.pdf>.



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# Sexual Abuse in the Convent: My Story

I come from humble beginnings. I am the sixth of eight children born to a selflessly generous man who worked his tail off to put his children through Catholic schools (as his single mother had done for him and his brother), and a wonderful and proud woman who, although she wanted children, was not especially fond of little ones but found herself with five under the age of six within the first seven years of marriage. I was born after a five year reprieve; less than three years later came another, and six years after that was born the last but hardly the least of us all.

I was a rather content child, needing much less attention than the sibling just before and after me. At the age of three I was mistakenly left behind at a park following a picnic with my immediate family. I was found by a young couple who called the police for assistance, and was home before anyone even noticed I wasn't in the car. I learned at a very young age to rely only on myself. No one else was dependable, or so I thought. And yet secretly, desperately I fantasized of a mother on whose lap I could sit and be read to and snuggled as if I was the center of her life.

Good grades were not rewarded in my home but expected. I was not a straight-A student but, as a senior in high school, I made my way from the honor roll to graduating as a member of

the National Honor Society. In the fall of my senior year I was introduced to a Sister who lived in my hometown who was assigned to familiarize me with the community that I felt drawn to enter. She was warm, kind, gentle and loving. She paid me more attention than anyone had ever done in my life. When she initiated physical affection of a sexual nature, I cried. But I did not say no and she did not stop.

I flunked out of my first year of college. The abuse continued until I entered the congregation three years later and moved to a community outside of my hometown. Feeling ashamed and disgraced, I kept that secret to myself. I avoided this Sister, as best as I could, at every meeting, funeral and ceremony for the next twenty-six years.

In the last several years I have been privileged to take advantage of wonderful mind, body and Spirit-filled therapies that have helped me tremendously to process and speak of that experience and its impact on my choices and actions up to the present moment. Encouraged by a therapist, three years ago I reported the abuse to the leadership of my congregation. I have not set eyes on the Sister since because I have chosen not to attend any congregational functions where I feared she might be present . . . until yesterday.

Recently I attended our annual jubilee for Sisters celebrating twenty-five, fifty, sixty, and seventy-five years within the community. I didn't want to go, but I know I can no longer make choices based on the fear of seeing her. I started to cry going into the chapel, but there were people everywhere so I breathed deeply and stopped my tears. My heart raced within my chest and I felt nauseous for every minute of the following three-and-a-half hours of prayer and celebration. I was so very scared she'd see me. In the end, I did not end up seeing her and I do not know if she saw me. All I know now is that I feel sad and alone, and that I will have to relive other days like this until our eyes meet for the first time.

Only two of my siblings and a handful of members in the community know of the abuse (a few close friends and two of the six members of our leadership team). It was and is kept very confidential. Imagine, we are both in the same congregation—the abused and the abuser. Even though we have a sexual abuse policy and the case went before a board of review—which determined that sexual abuse had taken place—it is still very difficult for people to accept. Some would rather I not talk about it; others would like me to let it go; at least one wonders why, if it happened thirty-plus years ago, I remain affected by it today.



I recently read an article in one of our community-sponsored publications having to do with the scandals of sexual abuse by clergy within the Catholic Church. The author wrote critically about the Church's tendency to point the finger at the sins of others without acknowledging those sins glaringly apparent within its own back yard. The author wrote that the Church is made up of:

justified sinners proclaiming "How Great Thou Art!" . . . Our efforts to seek justice in our world are but humble acts of gratitude for God's gracious gift that enables us to speak clearly on matters of social justice that really matter. As we do so, we realize that we must first practice justice ourselves before demanding it of others.

Encouraged, I responded to the article with my own story and experience of abuse, not at the hands of clergy, but of a religious woman, in fact a woman who is a member of the same group in whose publication the article was written. I knew that what I had written was perhaps a bit too close for comfort, but I sent it off to the editor inviting her to use it as an article or a letter to the editor, as she saw appropriate. The response I received suggested that I send it not only outside of the congregation, but outside of the country as well:

The issue you raise is an important one, one that should be brought out into the open to allow others who may have had similar experiences to find a forum and express their own deep hurt, anger, confusion, even healing. But, I have to say very honestly that I do not think [this] is the forum.

Perhaps you might want to consider a more "neutral" forum (not one so "identified" with [us -the community]). I would suggest that you look at the Irish publication, *Reality*.

I felt let down by the author's attempt to save face on behalf of the community and to protect the abuser, like I was being punished for something for which I was not at fault. I now understand why rape victims don't come forward to prosecute. Her e-mail to me ended with:

I am guessing that you are working with, or have worked with, a counselor or a spiritual director. Perhaps you might consider talking to him/her about the best and most appropriate forum for bringing out into the open your personal experience, an experience that I know has been very painful for you but that you have very

courageously and sensitively confronted.

I made an informed and well thought-out decision to submit an article to a publication for religious men and women to read about sexual abuse perpetrated by a woman religious, but her comment made me feel that I was a damaged person unable to make good decisions regarding my own experience. I was deeply disappointed by her words and assumptions.

When the abuse began, I was 17 years old and she was 40; today she is 73. My sister recently asked if she would be punished. My answer was no, but my abuser would probably beg to differ; she may feel that merely having been accused and found culpable is a punishment. I was told that she would undergo a psychological evaluation which may or may not include residential treatment. (Am I the only one who finds it a bit ironic that her "punishment" was the same as my "reward" so to speak; though mine was technically by choice?) I do not know if or where, when or for how long she may go anywhere. I, on the other hand, have been to hell. Only now am I finding my way back home.

The author of this article wishes to remain anonymous.

# AT LARGE *In a Secular Age*



**U**nbelief is having a field day among us right now, or so it seems. An item of recent interest is Stephen Greenblatt's article in *The New Yorker* (August 8, 2011) celebrating Lucretius, the old Latin poet. Lucretius's account of the beauties and pleasures of the world, *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things"), ascribes them all to the random combining of atoms. No place for a creator or any after-life. Greenblatt, interviewed with enthusiasm on National Public Radio, declared how much modern science is echoing Lucretius.

We have come to expect these announcements during the give and take between belief and unbelief today, with unbelief gaining the prestige. These are unsettled times for believers and seekers. How did we come to this and what are the exact contours of this skeptical culture? Charles Taylor, the moral philosopher who is Catholic, addressed these questions at length in a book whose title situates us squarely: *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press, Harvard University, 2007).

Taylor sums up our situation this way: "The unchallengeable status that belief enjoyed in earlier centuries has been lost. This is the major phenomenon of secularization" (530). What

Taylor calls "an enchanted view of the universe"—human beings alive in a field of spirits and God encountered everywhere—can no longer be taken for granted. A college student will find that out quickly. "Today a naturalistic materialism . . . presents itself as the only view compatible with the most prestigious institution of the modern world, viz. science" (28). Anyone having doubts about his or her faith is often overpowered by this naturalist materialism. (The theistic world view, well laid out, may be found in *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, 1992.)

"For the first time in history," says Taylor, "a purely self-sufficient humanism [has come] to be a widely available option" (18). The goal of such an option is not "Thy will be done" but "Let humans flourish." Taylor finds this view concretized in Albert Camus, and he comments: "This sense of ourselves as beings both frail and courageous, capable of facing a meaningless, hostile universe without faintness of heart, and of rising to the challenge of devising our own rules of life, can be an inspiring one" (9). Just read *The Plague*.

Living this way, however, can induce a serious malaise or sense of loss, even an identity crisis. Actions, goals,

achievements of ours can come to lack weight, gravity, thickness, substance. Peggy Lee, some time back, had a song for such a vacuum of meaning: "Is That All There Is?"

Taylor names our era The Age of Authenticity. We take for granted that we each have to find a distinctive way of expressing our humanity and not have something imposed. For two centuries the Romantic Movement has been inculcating that sense. The 1960s, which included the student uprising in Paris, strike Taylor as the hinge of an "expressive individualism," the self-orientation that by now has become a mass phenomenon (473). This vogue of self-realization has had the merit of dethroning moralism (minimum conformity to a certain code), but it has also eclipsed the old Renaissance ideal of civility—personal self-discipline, a sense of decorum, respect for government and law.

Certain goals for life have passed into currency: integral self-expression, sensual release, equal relations and social bonding. These goals, Taylor points out, cannot be realized together. The "higher selfishness" (a term from David Brooks), for one thing, takes its toll on equality of class and gender and on forming community. So the author is pretty frank about the down side of expressive individualism. Still he welcomes the stress on equality, especially for opening so many options to women. And he quips that intolerance is the one sin not to be tolerated today.

Our secular age widely accepts three propositions: the more choice we have the happier we are, authority is inherently suspect, sin is social not personal. Concerning happiness, Taylor says: "The pursuit of happiness has come to seem not only not to need a restrictive sexual ethic and the disciplines of deferred gratification, but actually to demand their transgression in the name of self-fulfillment" (493). Concerning choice, he notes how often it is invoked "as an all-trumping argument . . . [which] occludes almost everything important: the sacrificed alternatives in a dilemmatic situation, and the real moral weight of the situation" (478-479).

What about the future of religion? One writer on the topic, Steve Bruce, author of *Religion in the Modern World*, foresees a "widespread, taken-for-granted, and unexamined indifference to religion" (435). Taylor finds such an attitude in this dismissive remark about religion from a man in Brittany, France, once a Catholic bastion: "We don't have any time to worry about that any more. There's too much work. You need money, comfort, everyone's involved in that. The rest, pfffft [bah]!" (490). Taylor, though, does not agree with Bruce. "I cannot see 'the demand for religion' disappearing like that" (435).

For many young people today, dissatisfaction with a life encased here below provokes a search for higher purpose. "It is a personal search, and can easily be coded in the language of authenticity" (507). Human aspiration to religion will not flag. Taylor is at pains to repeat: "I hold that religious longing, . . . what Chantal Milon-Delsol calls a *désir d'éternité*, remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity" (530).

Expressive individualism is leaving its stamp on the religious quest. "In an age which seems dominated by the 'learned despisers of religion,' in Schleiermacher's phrase, what is really valuable is spiritual insight/feeling" (489). The focus is on following one's own spiritual path. The gamut of beliefs widens

beyond Christian orthodoxy, "fewer declaring belief in a personal God, while more hold to something like an impersonal force" (513). Since corporate religion has lost its public link and the spiritual is less and less related to a social grouping, unlimited pluralism could lie ahead.

Here is Charles Taylor's picture of our reality: "In a pluralist world many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other" (531). Where does that leave the Christian commitment? The heart still looks for a home in the divine, despite so much ignorance of scripture and Church teachings and history. The call to follow Jesus Christ, to incorporate in his Church, is as loud as ever and as strong a pull. But everyone who responds with the requisite passion to that desire for transcendence and transformation will do so in the bewildering context of a secular age. What a challenge for ministry and its inventiveness!



## TO DUST

*Here is the poser I put myself:  
Dust I am, to dust shall go, so  
Do I make hay in some Epicurean way,  
Sit back, relax, and cut the soul some slack.  
If soul there be? Such the philosophy  
Aired by the astute, aiming to turn faith mute,  
Still I'm a piece of work, with ears that perk  
At rustlings from afar, I hazard prayer.  
There's leaping of the heart for a fresh start  
To the One unknown, let ego mope alone.  
The world is but a pond, with forest beyond,  
As to your essence, dust: aspire you must.*



Father James Torrens, S.J., lives in Fresno, California, at the pastoral center of the diocese, and serves in ministry to the diocese.

# Namaste



# Promises, New Language

I have been struggling with the value of the traditional vows and their meaning in the twenty-first century. The traditional vows I took seem no longer to reflect the reality of my life.

I was intrigued with the concept of *Namaste*, the Asian belief that we all have a spark of God in each of us. Their traditional greeting, "the God in me greets the God in you," is extended to all that they meet with reverence and sincerity.

It was this concept that grabbed hold of me and led me to question my fifty-one-year-old vow of chastity, a vow that is about what is forbidden. I wanted to replace it with something that is defined by positive action and positive energy. I wanted to replace it with *Namaste*. I promised from that day forward to greet the God in others with the spark of God in me; to recognize God in all I meet; to replace chastity with an honest effort at blessed connections. That decision led me to an examination of the remaining two vows.

Many people worldwide have struggled for so long to eliminate poverty and the way it has ravaged so many lives. Why would I continue to glorify it with a promise to seek it for myself? Generosity seemed so much more appropriate than poverty. And so, another change.

Obedience to whom? It makes so much more sense to me to promise to obey the God-given potential that is in me. To develop my imagination and creativity. So there went obedience to be replaced with a promise to work at becoming and being the most human that I could be and to share my talent and energy that I have with anyone who needs them.

And then I met Abhaya.

I volunteer for the Catholic Charities Office of Migration and Refugee Services in Cleveland, Ohio. I got a call one afternoon asking if I would be available to take a refugee to the dentist the following morning. The woman needed to have four teeth extracted. I agreed to drive her. She spoke no English but her daughter Devangi did and would go with us to the dentist's office. They had recently arrived from a refugee camp in Nepal. The refugees in the camps, almost all ethnic Nepalis from southern Bhutan, have been living in camps in eastern Nepal since they were expelled from their homes in Bhutan more than twenty years ago because they were a political threat to the Bhutanese government. They cannot safely return to their homes. The necessary resettlement is sponsored and overseen by the United Nations.

After the surgery I drove Abhaya and Devangi home and told the daughter that I would go to the pharmacy to get the prescriptions filled. It was a very snowy day so when I got back to the house I stepped just inside the front door

so that I would not bring any snow or wet into the living room. I gave the meds to the daughter and my phone number in case anything else was needed that evening.

"You are not staying?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I will be on my way, but call me if you need me."

"But I have prepared food for you."

To leave would have been an insult to her offer of hospitality and generosity. Off came my boots. I sat on a chair next to the sofa where Abhaya was resting. While I was enjoying the plate of fruit that had been prepared for me, Devangi spooned broth into her mother's mouth. As Abhaya seemed to tire, I stood to leave.

Before leaving for home, with my hands prayer-like folded, I bent ever so slightly forward and said to Abhaya, "*Namaste*." Her old and wrinkled hands wrapped around mine as she uttered, "*Namaste*," in return. The God in each of us greeted the God in the other. It was an intensely heartfelt moment for me. I knew then that I had made the right choice in renewing old promises with new language.

The memory of her hands and her spirit embracing me stayed with me for a long time. I had been warmed and nourished by these women and I felt blessed. I was deeply impressed with their humility, their simplicity and their generosity. Impressed with their response to me, a stranger.

The more I thought about the encounter, the more I thought about the lessons they had reminded me of in one short day. Reverence and bless all those you meet. Be gentle with the elderly. Honor your mother. Share what you have. Welcome the stranger into your home, into your life. They were in their persons and in their actions incarnations of universal values.

Yes, they changed my world. They touched my soul. They will be a part of me forever.

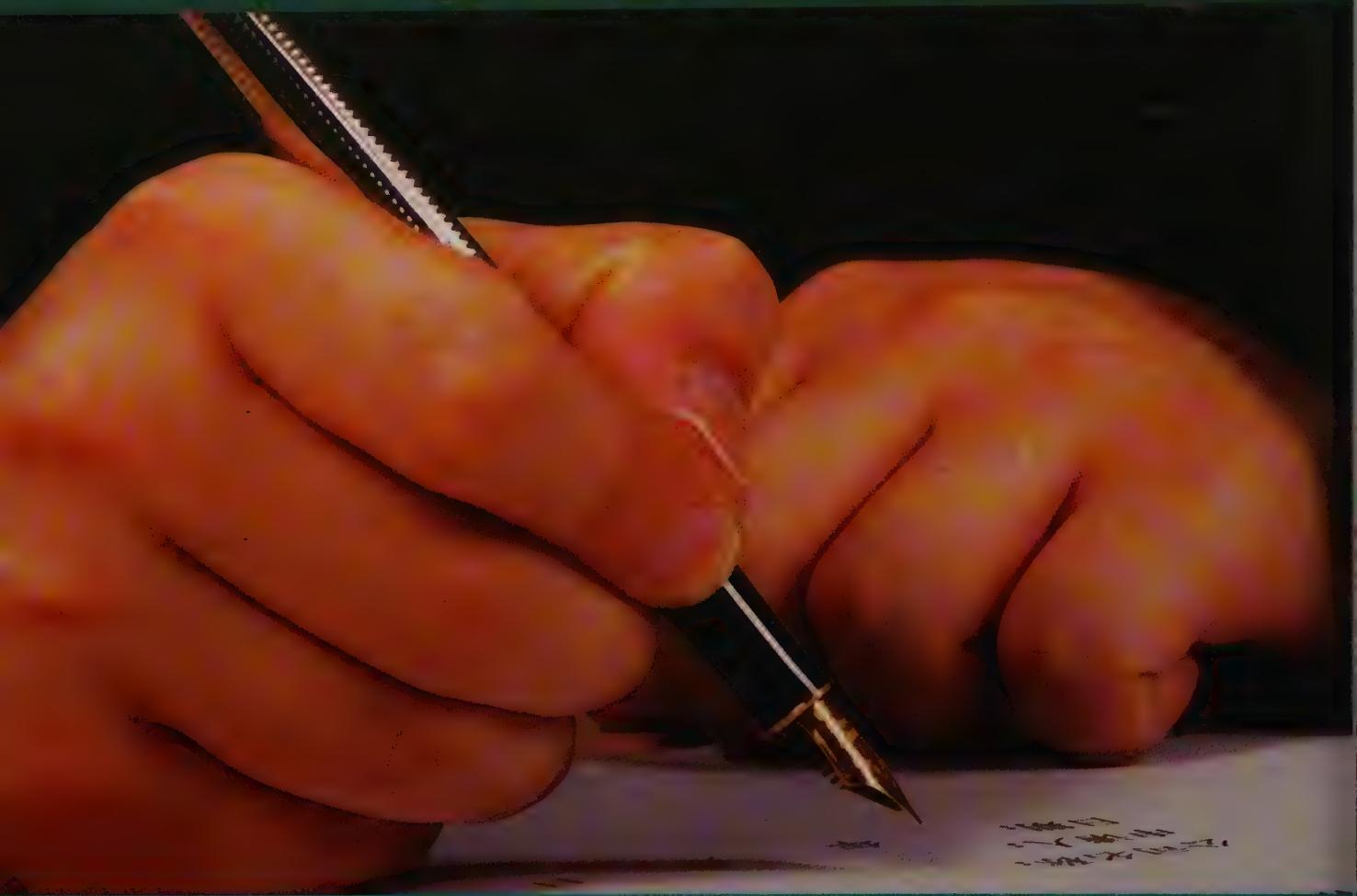
*Namaste* indeed.



Sister Margaret Cessna, H.M., a sister of the Humility of Mary, is a writer from Cleveland, Ohio. Her new book *Home to Each Other* is now available at amazon.com.

# The Ambiguities of Aging:

## Challenging Conversations with Our Parents and Our Elders



My initial impetus for writing this letter was my mother's casual comment to me on my last visit home. Forgetting a familiar word, she quipped, "I hope I am not 'getting' Alzheimer's." I have been thinking and journaling about our cultural perception of aging and how to provide for the well-being of our elders for some time. It is clear that many elders express the feeling that they are losing a sense of where they are, where they live, who they are and how they fit into the culture. They often feel that they are dropping out of the conversation with

the world, with their families and with each other. My mother's statements below about not wanting to move out of her home seem to be a confirmation of how she is courageously wrestling to remember who she is, who we are, and where she lives.

Dear Mother,

This is a letter that I have been intending to write to you for over a year. It has been on my mind that long. Two years ago, when Dad passed away, the conversation began about what would be in your best interest: to stay in the family home, where you now live alone, or move to an apartment in a community-housing setting, where you could live these next years of your life surrounded by other pilgrims who have resettled into this new territory.

It was a difficult conversation then and it is one that still comes up from time to time. At first, there were strong feelings in the family that you needed to have the friendship, support and care that communal living would provide. When your adult children talked amongst themselves this seemed to be the most obvious course of action. I live hundreds of miles away and while my brothers live there in town, their families and work make it difficult to provide you with the companionship that you need. We assumed, then, that it would be just a matter of time before loneliness would become too painful for you to bear.

But you put an end to that conversation. You said you were going to stay right where you were, where you had been for forty-five years. You declared that at ninety years old you were going to keep climbing those stairs to your second floor bedroom; that this was the perfect exercise to keep you going; that the railing on the stairs hadn't been used that much until now; that if needed, you could always "hitch" your way down the stairs. That wasn't how we wanted to end the conversation, with you bumping down the stairs like we used to when we were kids. We had hoped for a clearer, cleaner, safer resolution, but you ended it there.

So why am I writing to you about this now? Perhaps I am wondering if this conversation is really over. In our weekly long-distance phone calls, I have heard the weight of loneliness enter your voice. You often tell me that you haven't gotten out of the house or spoken to anyone that day, maybe not for a couple of days. You say that you really enjoy staying in your bedroom and watching television, that the newscasters are quite charming people. One woman announcer recently has gotten pregnant and another young fellow, a veteran of military service, has quite a good sense of humor. You tell me that I shouldn't worry about all the solicitations and the offers from Publisher's Clearinghouse because you are aware that your chances of winning a million dollars are slim and that you won't gamble the house away.

I couldn't help but wonder, during our last conversation, if loneliness wasn't starting to get to you. Then, to my surprise, you started to tell me that you were engaged in another conversation that began this past year, just as the door of loneliness was opening up for you. You heard Dad's voice and felt his presence next to you when you were getting ready for bed. He was comforting you. Then you began to tell me about all the ways that your life with him, for over 63 years, sustained you: how he had loved listening to those particular news programs as well, that the daily ritual of toast, coffee and the morning paper still smelled and tasted of the fullness of your life together, and that most significantly, this house continued to hold the dreams and the memories of the whole family. This house had been what the two of you spent your whole life securing and creating. It was your dream home.

It began to dawn on me why you had so abruptly silenced your three sons' good intentions to locate a new neighborhood for you. To your own surprise, things were beginning to "come home" to you now. Now you had time to read old letters, to really look at familiar objects in your household which you had been using all these years, to gather together photos, to listen to music you love and watch favorite movies, to take calls from dear friends and to talk to Dad in that lovely prayer-like twilight just before falling sleep.

Memories are funny things aren't they? They remind us that the past is still alive and speaking to us. They remind us of moments in our lives when something happened. It might have been a touching moment or an embarrassing one, a revelation, an experience of terror, or the delicious culmination of a long prepared-for achievement. Births, anniversaries, holidays, illnesses, dinners, confessions, accidents, breakups, deaths: they had all left their mark, their image, their memory. But just because they happened in our past doesn't mean they are finished. They still have things to reveal to us. They want us to return to them and dwell further on their significance. Perhaps that is what makes them memories. They keep coming back to us, reminding us that there is more here of our unlivéd life. They want us to pay attention and they too want to "come home."

So, I think I am beginning to get it. As you said to us, you have needed to stay right where you are. There is some harvesting to be done, a homecoming to prepare for, even if loneliness must accompany you. That china cabinet stood by us for all those family dinners, full of plates that we took out, used, washed and put back. Those plates on which we ate each day still hold memories that nourish you. That card table which held all the hands that were dealt on game night, still holds your hand, comfortingly. Memories try to remind us that we are all delicately held in the hands of time. They reveal, again, the precise moments that

are weaving together the larger, divine story of who we once were and who we are becoming. All these precious things that surround you now are part of the original covenant you made with life, a promise you remain faithful to in these quieter years. You seem to be telling us that you need this time to see how it will all come back home to you, and that you don't need for us to try to foreclose upon your home, your homecoming.

Well, Mom, I think our conversation about this is "to be continued." Your loneliness seems to be moving toward a deeper solitude, but we may still need to talk about your life in the community.

I hope to come home for a visit soon.

Love,

Your Son



Steven B. Bennett is a licensed professional counselor and professor in the Department of Counseling at Regis University in Denver.

## Editor's Note

It seems that more and more of my conversations with friends and family have to do with the issue of how we talk productively with our parents and other elders about the decisions they face as they age. Our perspective as their children or other family members, or as younger members in community, is often different from theirs. We want to respect their freedom while also offering perspective on the pros and cons of the choices they face.

This issue of honoring and caring for elders has become a cultural phenomenon in the United States, and likely has different expressions elsewhere around the world. I invite you, our readers, to offer your thoughts on the challenge of engaging in this dialogue. Perhaps the form of a letter chosen by Steven Bennett in this article will be a helpful one. Other writings of between 500 and 1000 words in length are welcome. We will publish appropriate responses in a future issue.

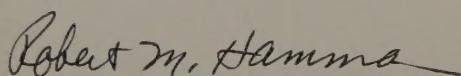
# Invitation to Authors

The principal intention of our editorial staff and advisory board in publishing **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** is to be of help to people involved in the work of fostering the growth of others. This growth, which is as important for the well-being of the church and society as it is for that of individuals, cannot be achieved apart from beneficial interaction among persons; nor can it be accomplished without the grace of the Creator, who wants us all to live our lives as maturely as possible and is glorified by our doing so. The articles we publish are written to contribute to the promotion of such constructive interaction among persons, and between them and God.

The intellectual, emotional, spiritual, moral, physical, sexual and cultural aspects of human development are all of deep concern to us. It is our hope that writers who desire to contribute to the ministry this magazine represents will feel encouraged to deal with any of these areas, keeping in mind the fact that our readers include church leaders, pastoral ministers, educators, religious superiors, spiritual directors, athletic coaches, religious formation personnel, campus ministers, missionaries, people performing healing ministries, parents, women and men engaged in lay ministry, and other people of various religious denominations who have in their care persons of all ages whom they want to help develop to the fullest degree of maturity, happiness and human effectiveness.

We want the articles we publish to be of interest to as many of these readers as possible. We want the content of the articles to shed theoretical light on the various aspects of human development. We also desire to provide as many how-to articles as we can, in which authors describe for our readers what they have learned from both their successful and their unsuccessful attempts to nourish the growth of others. We are especially interested in presenting articles that discuss the ways that human development-related issues and problems are handled and ministries are performed in diverse cultural settings around the world.

In brief, we publish **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** so that people wishing to become fully alive and to help others do the same can benefit from the knowledge and experience of writers at home in such fields as theology, psychology, medicine, psychiatry, sociology, spirituality, education and organizational development—writers who realize the importance of sharing their expertise with appreciative readers around the world, who are generous enough to take time to put their ideas on paper so that human beings can become what we are all created to be: persons being made whole in the image and likeness of God. We welcome submissions through our website at [www.humandevmag.org](http://www.humandevmag.org).



Robert M. Hamma  
Editor-in-Chief

# NEW! HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Look for these articles in the Spring Issue of HUMAN DEVELOPMENT on the theme "Earth Consciousness."

Eco-Christology: Living in Creation as the Body of Christ

Illia Delio, O.S.F.

Ecopyschology

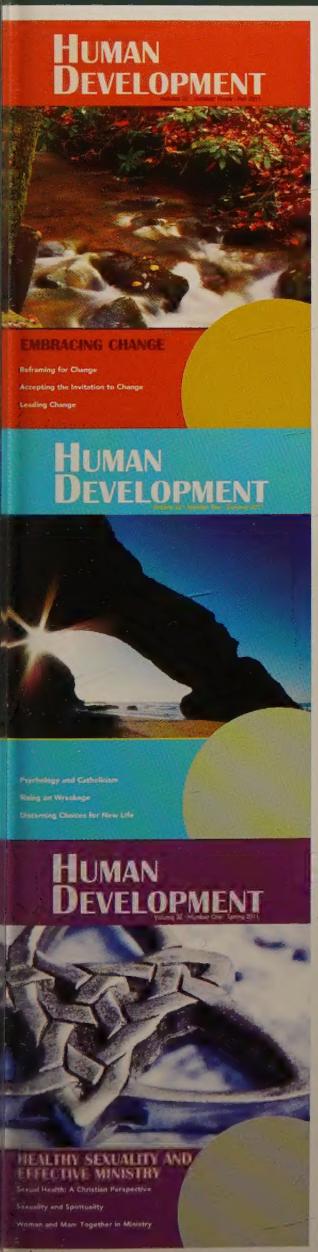
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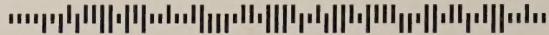
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